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DORIS.

CHAPTER I.

"He woulde think it were a disparâge
To his estate, so low for to alight."

"It's your duty!" says the old nobleman, lying back in his chair, and calmly sipping his claret,—"your positive duty! I don't think much of that word duty myself, it's—it's very inferior,—only meant for the lower classes, as a rule,—but there are certain occasions, such as the present, when even *we* must introduce it."

"More's the pity," says his son, indifferently: he is amusing himself in an indolent fashion by pulling the whiskers of a huge black cat, called Tom, that lies half asleep upon the chimney-piece.

"We're in a deucedly bad way, you know," goes on the marquis, calmly,—"deuced! We've been running in it for a number of years, and now we've got pretty nearly to the end of it. It's a treacherous way, impossible to gauge. If I were—that is" (politely), "if you were a commonplace sort of fellow, I should probably explain the state of affairs to you by telling you that 'ruin stares us in the face!' but trite remarks are abhorrent to me; they positively hurt! In fact," delicately flicking away a troublesome fly with his napkin, "I have observed in them a tendency to lower the spirits and raise the temper, two frames of mind particularly to be avoided. To be quite fair, however, it must be acknowledged that 'ruin' is a word we are likely to hear a good deal more about if something isn't done, and soon. However—— I say—try this Burgundy, my dear Donat. You're sure to like it; *I* like it."

"If it were anything but marriage," says the young man, discontentedly, ignoring his father's airy change of tone and topic. "It's such a drag; such a stone round one's neck: once done, no getting out of it, you know that."

"There is,—there is," says Lord Dundeady, reflectively, throwing up his head. "Not that I should recommend

such a course to you. I hope I never forget I am your father; and publicity is always vulgar, and the courts expensive. No, no, to live together 'till death us do part' is much the easiest plan. Let me impress this upon you."

"It entirely depends upon whom one has to live with for that uncertain period," says the young man, with a shrug, and an unconscious twist of Tom's ear that makes that worthy jump. "If I must marry for money, I hope the wife you have selected for me is not more than ordinarily hideous."

"Hideous! My dear fellow!" says Lord Dundeady, laying down his glass with a shocked air. "How miserably you misjudge me! Am I such a monster of selfishness that I would ask you to immolate yourself upon the altar of a plain woman? The gods forbid! No. She is quite all she ought to be, so far as features go."

"Am I then to suppose she drops her *h*'s?" asks Lord Clontarf, gloomily.

"For the second time," says the marquis, reproachfully, "you would seek to convict me of wanton cruelty. There can be no question about *h*'s, because she is an Irishwoman; her property for the most part lies in our own county. By the bye," thoughtfully, "which is our own county? I have been so long out of my native land that I have quite forgotten. Cork, isn't it?"

"Oh, yes, Cork," says the younger man, impatiently, who is evidently feeling himself aggrieved.

"Ah! quite so," says the marquis, airily; "knew it was somewhere in the north."

"Cork is distinctly south," says his son, curtly.

"It doesn't make the least difference," returns his father, most agreeably; "at all events she is our countrywoman. Do you think I would ask you to bind yourself to a middle-class Englishwoman? Pah! The very thought of it is offensive. For my own sake I should object to such an arrangement: a daughter-in-law of that type would drive me mad. No, she is Irish, but has been for most of her life abroad, either at school, or travelling, or something, and is —well, I shan't run her up to you in any exaggerated form, but I may at least say she is presentable. Go and see her to-morrow, and judge for yourself."

"I'll take your word for it," says Donat, somewhat hastily. "Let me put off the evil day as long as I can. By the bye, you speak as if she was next door. Where is she?"

"At the Langham. I'll tell you who knows her," says the marquis, as though a thought has just struck him,— "your old friend Mrs. Desmond; she lives in our county too, I think."

"Monica in town?" says Clontarf, with some surprise. "I had no idea of it,—dear little thing! Desmond with her?"

"Is he ever without her! If you dream of conquest in that quarter, Donat, you must be a—that is—er—without intellect. They are quite vulgarly devoted," says the marquis, with a sapient smile.

"I have at least the intellect necessary to know a good woman when I see one," says Donat, a trifle coldly. "Monica Desmond is the purest thing I know. It would take a very brave man—I speak wrongly—a thoroughgoing rascal, to offend her, by either word or deed."

The marquis has followed this speech with little nods of the liveliest admiration. Now he gazes smilingly at his son, as though he would say, "Very well done indeed."

"Yes, yes," he says, aloud, "you inherit it. We all talk well. Your grandfather, the late marquis, was quite a distinguished orator, and a most accomplished liar. He was very much admired in his time. I well remember how he——"

"Never mind my grandfather: let us return to my *fiancée*," says Donat, interrupting him with a rather unpleasant laugh. From all he has ever heard of the deceased relative in question it has seemed to this degenerate grandson that the strangling of him at his birth would have been a meritorious act on the part of somebody.

"Brusqueness, my dear boy, is a fault belonging to this generation," says the marquis, with undiminished good humor: "don't encourage it. But to the fair *fiancée*, if you will. Now, what more of her?"

"You say she is passable in appearance, and respects her English: so far so good. Now for her faults."

"Really, you puzzle me," says his father, with the air of one just awakened to a difficulty. "If she has a fault it is most assuredly not on the surface. I give you my word (though I dare say you will find it hard to accept it), but for my previous knowledge of her antecedents I should, when first I saw her, have regarded her as quite one of ourselves: short upper lip, Grecian nose, haughty expression, irreproachable hands and feet, marvellously calm manner. Not a suspicion of the tallow or herrings or whiskey, or whatever it was, about her."

"I dare say she won't have me," says Clontarf, with a gleam of hope, and yet with a certain touch, too, of fear. There are many reasons why he should dread the absolute rejection of his suit.

"She will," says the marquis, tapping the table thoughtfully with a very beautiful hand, fine as a woman's, on

which time has laid few wrinkles. "Don't be uneasy on that score. I met them at Scarborough last year, and——"

"Them! How many of them? I'm not expected to marry more than one at a time, am I?" says Clontarf, with a touch of amusement overshadowed by bitterness.

"Fortunately not. The aunt (who constitutes the 'them') would be rather a tough customer to manage. As I was saying, we met at Scarborough, where the girl was creating quite a furore, as much on account of her appearance as her fortune. I admired her. In fact, my dear Donat, had your mother abstained from presenting me with you, I believe I should have tried my luck with her on my own account. But my duty as a father was clear to me. I got introduced; sounded the aunt; mentioned you casually—very casually—as my only son, and heir (to what, I suppressed); spoke of you by your present title; hinted at your coming one, to be gained by my decease. (Oh, yes, my dear fellow, we must all die! No getting out of that. It's a beastly bore, I allow, but we must all do it.) Well, I was quite open with them: I even hinted at monetary difficulties. Nothing so taking as complete candor, if well done! Indeed, I have always thought that little motto of 'Poor Richard' (or"—lightly—"whoever it was) that declares 'honesty to be the best policy,' one of the cleverest, most worldly bits of wisdom our ancestors have transmitted to us."

"Yes; and what did the aunt say?" asks the young man, in a faintly-bored tone.

"Much—in fact, I may say a vast deal—of nonsense," says the marquis, briskly.

"Is she as lovely as the niece?"

"N-o—n-o,"—rather unwillingly.

"As lovely in mind, perhaps?"

"It is really so hard to judge upon a slight acquaintance," says the marquis, winningly. "She seemed to me a worthy woman. Very honest and outspoken, *horribly*"—with a sudden forgetfulness—"outspoken! But"—recovering himself hastily—"one should not find fault with that. In this age of hollowness and sham, one should be grateful when brought face to face with a woman who nobly disdains subterfuge, and insists upon calling a spade a spade."

"'And Bransom's extract of coffee the finest in the world,'" puts in Clontarf, lazily. "By the bye, what did she call *you*? Anything opprobrious?"

The marquis, who has his glass at his lips at this moment, chokes a little, as at some irresistible remembrance, but declines to answer the question.

"Well, describe her, at all events," says his son.

"Who? The girl?"

"No; the aunt."

"She is tall, thin, and powerfully eloquent upon certain subjects" (there is positive feeling in the marquis's tone as he says this). "She has a passion for her niece, and a crimson nose. It is a nose so large that one can almost see into her brain. A very disagreeable nose indeed; but this in confidence, my dear Donat."

"Is thy servant a dog?" says Donat. Then, somewhat abruptly, "Does Miss —— By the bye, what is my *fiancée's* name?"

"Miss Costello,—Doris."

"Does Miss Costello inherit the nose?"

"Tut! I told you it was pure Greek. Let me get on with my story. I mentioned you to the aunt, and could see she snapped at you, but she pretended indifference. Niece wanted to get into society. Aunt was determined to place her there. So was I. There was a certain conversation in which aunt gave it as her opinion niece was fit to adorn any sphere,—I think she called it spear,—and I agreed with her. I suggested at the same time that you should help her to make her *début*. She hesitated; so I left Scarborough. She wrote me a—a letter. I answered it. I answered many another, during the past nine months. At length she spoke to niece, and the latter has now consented to see you. That means the rest. Last Thursday I called at the Langham and had an interview with the elder lady."

"As you have gone so far, perhaps you and your colleague—the lady with the 'red, red nose'—will go a little further, and do the proposing for me," says Lord Clontarf, with a grim smile.

"Do try this Burgundy," says his father, pushing it towards him with an air that is almost tender. "I feel quite desolated that you won't enjoy it with me. No! Ah, well! We were saying—— Of course it is very absurd of her to expect it, my dear boy, but, after all, perhaps something is due to the girl. I am very much afraid," leaning back luxuriously in his chair the better to appreciate the pinch of snuff he takes with delicate fingers from a charming little box of the time of Louis Quatorze, with an exquisite if slightly *prononcée* painting upon the inside lid,—"I am terribly afraid you will have to make your bow and your little speech for yourself. But she will be quite prepared,"—reassuringly; "there will be no awkwardness, no leading up to the point, no unpleasantness of any sort."

Suddenly the young man bursts into laughter fresh and clear. There is not a tinge of bitterness about it this time, nothing but honestest mirth. His Irish blood has forced

to the front the one small suspicion of fun in the dreary prospect held out to him.

"King Cophetua and the beggar-maid grow paltry before your tale," he says, at last. "I hope Miss Costello is quite aware of the honor that awaits her; you speak as if she were about to contract a royal marriage."

"To her it is—almost!" says the marquis, solemnly. "And, as you know, our veins are not altogether destitute of blood royal."

"The less we say about that the better," says Donat, with a shrug. "Well, there is comfort in the thought that my maid so far differs from Cophetua's that she is not a beggar."

"Half a million," says the marquis, sententiously.

"It's the deuce of a bore, for all that," says the younger man, discontentedly.

The father, raising his eyes, looks at him sharply for the twentieth part of a second. It is a mere flash. Now, when he speaks, his tone is calm as ever, and his eyes are lowered.

"Any other attachment, Donat?" he asks, indifferently.

"No," says Clontarf, just as indifferently. "It sounds odd, doesn't it? but still you will believe me when I say that, though I am now twenty-nine, I have never been in love in my life."

Secretly the marquis draws a deep breath of relief.

"I have always had the happiness of knowing," he says, with a little courtly bow, "that a yes or no from you is as good as any other man's oath. I am glad your heart is free. If you had told me it was engaged in any legitimate affair, I should decline at once and forever to pursue our present discussion; although, I confess, this moneyed alliance I suggest to you lies very near my heart,—that is, my interests: it is"—airily—"quite the same thing."

"Well, there is no one," says Donat, absently, who is lost in private speculation as to whether or not it can be possible that his father really believes in himself at times.

"I have a genuine sympathy with a love-affair," goes on the elder man, leaning his elbows on the arms of his chair, and bringing the tips of his fingers together. "I loved your mother,—poor soul!" As indeed he had for the one short year she was given to him. How it would have been with her if she had lived for two, is a question impossible to answer now,—a problem that perhaps it was as well she didn't try to solve.

"I think you said she wasn't vulgar?" says Clontarf, referring, not to his mother, but his *future*.

"I did. I defy you to find a flaw in her ordinary conversation. What she may be *en famille* is more than I can

answer for. But I doubt if even then she would betray so much as a coarse gesture. I could see no trade-mark upon her anywhere. Last Thursday, when, as I tell you, I called, she received me perfectly; there was just a *soupçon* of coldness, but admirable self-possession. She moves well, and her gowns fit her. She appeared to me thoroughly cleansed from all taint."

"I'm glad of that," says Clontarf, with a low laugh; "perhaps, after all, *mon père's* pile was not made by unpleasant tallow, or reprehensible whiskey, but by soap! That would account in a satisfactory fashion for her spotlessness. But there is one thing more. Is she—is she—oh!"—impatiently—"for want of a better word, is she gushing?"

"Ha! ha! ha!" laughs the marquis, as youthfully as though he were thirty instead of seventy. "Dispossess yourself of that idea at once, or your first glance at her will be too startling a revelation. Why, my dear boy, she is an iceberg!"

"Ah! So? You give me some comfort," says Clontarf. "I shall not, then, be under the necessity of swearing to her I adore her when I don't. Yet"—doubtfully—"this icicle, it appears, has so far melted as to be able to give herself to a man, unsolicited,—at least by himself."

"I must beg, Donat, you won't be coarse," says the marquis, with a fine shrug of his slight shoulders. "Be witty be pungent in conversation, be even indecent, if you will but at least veil the indiscretion, or the sarcasm."

"Tom," says Lord Clontarf, addressing the big black cat, "if ever you are indecent or pungent or witty, be sure you don't let your world know of it, or they will caterwaul you to death. Be as coarse as ever you like *sub rosa*, but don't offend polite nostrils; that is the moral of it. Nine o'clock, by Jove, and I told Dicky Browne I'd meet him at the St. James's sharp half-past eight. I say, dad, come along with me, and see your favorite Mrs. Kendal again, in 'The Squire.' You can have a seat in our box."

"That will suit me very nicely indeed," says the marquis, pleasantly. "Well, run, then, and get yourself ready."

As the door closes behind his son, the smile fades from his father's face, and he grows contemplative.

"I wish poor Gwendoline had left me a second son," he murmurs, regretfully, toying with his glass, but not raising it to his lip. "Donat is too good a possession to be wasted on a *parvenue*."

CHAPTER II.

"Was never thing seen to be praised derre,
Nor under blacke cloude so bright a sterre."

ONE can understand that the theatre is crowded. Mrs. Kendal had just brought to a termination that first most perfect scene of "The Squire," and the curtain has fallen. A few eyes are full of sympathetic tears, all of admiration.

"Good-evening, Dicky," says the marquis, as he steps into the box, laying his hand on the arm of a young man who is already there.

"Good-evening, my lord," says Dicky Browne.

Those who have before this been made known to Mr. Browne need now no second introduction; those who have not, require a word. He is a nondescript young man with a versatile expression; in appearance youthful, and at heart the same, but his age is doubtful. Anything from eighteen to twenty-eight would suit him to a nicety, but nobody knows the exact truth of it except Dicky himself, his father having forgotten all about it long ago, and about Dicky too, a good deal.

Mr. Browne himself, when questioned on the subject (which is frequently), with a delicacy of feeling seldom to be met with nowadays, always declines to make a satisfactory reply.

"You see, I am such a universal favorite," he is wont to say, with a modesty all his own, "that I positively shrink from letting my birthday be publicly known. I feel that if I were to do so, the yearly advent of my natal day would usher in and force upon me such a shower of costly gifts as it would take a lifetime to acknowledge. No, Lady Maud" (or Ethel, or Clara, as the case may be), "I love you and all my friends too well to permit them to expend half their substance upon me every twelve months."

"My dear Dicky, I wasn't going to give you anything," says (perchance) Lady Maud.

"No?"—unabashed: "then for what on earth do you want to know the number of my years?"

"Well, you see," coaxingly, "Onslow and I had a little bet on about it."

"Which I guess neither you nor Onslow will win," says Mr. Browne, with a disgracefully mirthful sense of his own power.

To-night he is looking specially young,—surprisingly

young. There is an air of actual—I was going to say boyishness, but that would be too old—childishness about him, that might have disarmed a few. Indeed, Dicky, as a rule, is one of those people who are always looking "younger than ever;" where he will get to—unless it be swaddling-clothes—if he grows younger than he is at present, is unknown.

"Really, Dicky," says Lord Dundeady, regarding him with something akin to gratitude, "it does one good only to look at you. You make one forget there is such an obnoxious thing as time. Seen your father of late?"

"One never sees him unless it is late," says Mr. Browne, with a transparent attempt at gloom. "He and the 'rosy morn' haven't seen each other for many a year. Look! There he is now in the stalls. See him, Donat? And, of course, with one of the prettiest girls in town."

The stalls are crammed: two or three women with very lovely faces attract the notice of Dicky and Clontarf; the marquis, who is near-sighted, contents himself with a conversation, rich in persiflage, carried on with Mr. Browne.

"Look at that girl in—in—in buff," says Dicky, desperately, alluding to a handsome brunette in palest primrose; "pretty, isn't she, if a trifle nosy—Jewish, eh?"

"Not so correct as the girl in the box opposite, in plain white," says Clontarf: "see her? She's with the Desmonds."

"By Jove, that's Miss Costello," says Dicky Browne, as though surprised. "Why, I heard she had gone back to her native soil."

"Who?" asks Lord Dundeady, startled.

"Miss Costello, the Irish heiress." His son changes color.

"Where?" he asks, hastily.

"The girl you spoke of,—in the box directly opposite."

"With Mrs. Desmond?"

"Yes."

Clontarf grows silent. A moment before he had believed her absolutely beautiful (as in truth she is); now he begins to descry in her certain faults. A distaste to her—to the girl who for the sake of acquiring rank has elected to sell herself, body and soul—is hardening his heart against her and blinding his very eyes.

"Go and speak to Mrs. Desmond. This is as good an opportunity as you can find for getting through your introduction to Miss Costello," whispers the marquis to him, hurriedly.

"As good as another, no doubt," says Clontarf, dryly. "Well, be it so. You will come with me, of course?"

"Oh, of course, of course!" says Lord Dundeady, but

there is a lamentable want of alacrity in his manner as he says it, considering the righteousness of the cause. "Who else is in Mrs. Desmond's box, Dicky?" he asks, turning to Mr. Browne. Dicky knows everybody, and everybody knows Dicky.

"Mannering," he says, promptly. "Fellow who goes to one theatre or another every night of his life, yet has never yet been known to look at the stage. I suppose it's the house he likes; but surely he could light up at home. Bouverie took him awfully short last night: he said, 'Halloo, Mannering, I hear you've been to Irving to see the Lyceum!' Mannering's a sulky beggar, so he took it very badly, but we all laughed."

"Are you ready?" asks Donat, looking at his father.

"Yes; oh, yes," says the marquis. Then he pretends to drop his glasses, and makes quite a business of hunting for them. He fidgets, tries in a deplorably bald fashion to look unconcerned, and finally—gives in.

"Donat," he says, in a low and quavering voice, "ask Dicky if—if—the aunt's there."

Donat laughs somewhat maliciously.

"This is dreadful," he says. "I had no idea you had fallen a victim to that worthy woman's charms. When talking of her an hour ago you artfully concealed the fact of her being young and lovely. You were actually unkind about her nose! What am I to infer from all this? Come, I feel now even more anxious to meet your young woman than my own."

"Look here, Donat! I shan't stir until I get an exact account of who is in that box," says the marquis, doggedly. "If there is anybody with false ringlets and a red nose, I regret to say it will be out of my power to introduce you to-night to Miss Costello."

"Don't take it to heart like that," says Clontarf, with suppressed mirth. "I give you my word I'll be barely civil to her; I swear I won't try to cut you out. I never do a sneaky thing like that."

"Clontarf, move to one side," says the marquis, with dignity. Then he beckons to Dicky Browne. "Who is in Mrs. Desmond's box?" he asks.

"Mrs. Desmond, Miss Costello, Mannering, and Kit Beresford," says Mr. Browne, docking them off as they sit.

"No one else?"

"Not one."

"What a disappointment!" says Clontarf; "I was bent upon an introduction to my aunt,—I was very near saying my step-mamma. Never mind," turning to his father with generous encouragement in his tone: "I dare say she'll see you to-morrow."

The marquis, muttering something disparaging about the "manners of the present day," rises from his seat, and Clontarf moves to the door.

"We'll be back in five minutes, Dicky," he says to Mr. Browne. "We are just going to the Desmonds' box for a moment."

"I'll go with you," says Mr. Browne, genially, rising too with alacrity. "I know 'em all as well as anything."

So together they present themselves to Mrs. Desmond, and say whatever little honeyed speeches come to their lips. Then Lord Dundeady turns to Miss Costello.

"It was indeed a fair wind that blew me here to-night," he says, with old-fashioned gallantry. "Will you permit me to make known to you my son, Clontarf."

Miss Costello, who has grown a little pale, murmurs something in which the words "very pleased" are alone audible, and then Clontarf bows to her, and she to him, and the first step is taken. Though she is pale, as I say, she is not nervous or confused: her eyes, meeting Clontarf's fully, linger upon them for quite twenty seconds; then, without lowering them, she slowly turns her own away. By so doing she gives Donat a chance of examining her face more closely than he could have presumed to do had she entered into conversation with him.

Her figure is slight and willowy, but not meagre; and he thinks, if standing, she would be rather above than below the middle height. Her eyes are large, dark, and luminous, and purple as the hearts of hyacinth-bells; they are, too, full of a vague melancholy, as yet undefined, but suggestive of perfection in the future. Her forehead is low, broad, and clear, her expression singularly cold and haughty. But for Clontarf's previous knowledge of her ancestors (I mean ancestor), he might have believed her veins imbrued with the blood of all the Howards. Every clear-cut feature is replete with the delicacy of curve and line that is commonly (if foolishly) supposed to accompany high breeding.

Miss Costello's face is so filled with insolent indifference that to Clontarf it is almost repellent. Yet there is a lurking sweetness in the small red mouth that lightens the severity of it and makes one feel its beauty. It is at least a very uncommon beauty. Half the world might pass it by, but the other half would be sure to bow before it. Clontarf, with his mind embittered, belongs to the first half.

She is dressed in a gown of Indian muslin, covered with lace light as itself. It reaches to her throat, but has no sleeves. Her bare arms are absolutely faultless, so are her hands. Upon these perfect arms she wears no gloves, but

only long white mittens that reach beyond her elbows and cover them in part. She wears (Clontarf notes this particularly) neither brooch, nor bracelet, nor necklet, nor any other ornament except rings, with which her taper fingers are literally hidden.

Seeing with what persistency she keeps her head turned aside, as though determined not to acknowledge his presence, Clontarf is so fired with a perverse desire to hear her voice again that he approaches nearer, until he actually leans upon the back of her chair.

"A charming piece," he says, addressing her pointedly.

"Very." Raising her white lids, she regards him languidly for a brief moment, and then turns away again, as if there is nothing more to be said.

"Mrs. Kendal, in a part such as this, has few rivals," says Clontarf, going on in a haphazard sort of way, merely with the idea of keeping her attention arrested. "She is so wonderfully real."

"A rare virtue nowadays," says Miss Costello. Her voice, like "Annie Laurie's," is "low and sweet." She doesn't look at him this time, but gazes in an abstracted fashion at the big violoncello in the orchestra, as though it has suddenly become to her an object of devouring interest. Her tone, however, is peculiar.

"You mean?" says Clontarf, uncertainly. The faintest flicker of a smile crosses her lips.

"*You* mean?" she says, in turn, letting her lashes droop over her eyes. The lightest touch of mockery lies upon her lips.

"Oh, nothing," says Clontarf, hastily. He is annoyed, though he scarcely knows why.

"A fault!" she says, as sententiously as before. "In this rapid age one should always mean something, be it good or bad."

Clontarf raises his brows and smiles unsmilingly.

"Yes; you are of course right. And, after all, I suppose I meant so much as to wish to tell you that Mrs. Kendal attracts me in no small degree by her very womanliness. She is specially charming in 'The Squire,' is she not? But then, no doubt, a genuine love-affair is always productive of sympathy."

"Is it?" The mocking smile plays about her lips again. "Anything genuine should be."

Clontarf reddens.

"You surely believe in love?" he says, lightly.

"Certainly,—only—there are other things I believe in—more."

Something in her tone piques him to argument.

"That is to be regretted," he says, a little obstinately.

"There are few things so worthy of belief as that sweetest of all sentiments."

At this a faint low laugh issues from her lips. Deliberately she lifts her eyes, and looks at him as though he were to her a new and important study.

"Yes,—yes," she says, slowly. "And yet I should not have thought to find its champion in—you!"

Biting his lips, Clontarf turns abruptly away, and drops into the background.

"With all her coldness, she has sufficient warmth for the making of a shrew," he says to himself, with a frown. "Incapable of affection herself, she yet sneers at those who at least have an honest belief in it."

"Because I have so many thousands a year, he is willing to marry me, without feeling for me a spark of love; and yet he dares to come here and prate to me of fine sentiments," thinks the girl, with a shudder of disgust, but a studiously calm face. "Pah!"

A mutual contempt for each other springs to birth within their hearts, but unaccompanied by any determination to forego the marriage that lies before them.

Even as Clontarf stands moodily watching her, he sees Dicky Browne take the place he has just deserted, and say something to her. She turns to him. Again a smile lights her beautiful face. But how different a smile this time! It transfigures her. A swift blush, too, dyes her pale cheeks. It is one of pleasure. Evidently she likes Dicky Browne. Clontarf is struck by the sudden change that has come over her, waking her from indifference into life. It is a revelation. She can feel, then!—can have her loves and hates as well as another! and yet is willing—nay, anxious—to throw herself into the arms of a complete stranger, for the sake of gaining mere worldly position! An increased contempt for this heartless though lovely creature suffuses the young man's soul. Turning aside, he joins his father, who is holding a very animated discussion with Mrs. Desmond.

Mrs. Desmond is a matron so wonderfully childish in appearance as to make one marvel how she can be called matron at all. Yet there is a small thing at this moment sleeping peacefully in its cradle in Berkeley Square that calls her mother,—I mean, that is, it would if it could.

She—the mother—is singularly sweet to look at. She has great large friendly eyes, and a friendly mouth, and an air towards young men so generally protective as to be quaint and amusing. Need it be said that all young men adore her?

The girl sitting next her—her sister Kit Beresford—is a slender maiden of about seventeen. She is, according to

Dicky Browne, "very much Mrs. Desmond, only more so." She is indeed more *prononcée*, and is possessed of a sprightliness one would look for in vain in her gentler sister; yet there is always something about her that suggests the milder Monica. Just now there is a touch of disappointment about her pretty face, and an air of weariness indescribable as she listens to the platitudes poured into her unwilling ears by Mr. Mannering.

As for the latter, he is scarcely worth a word; yet I suppose I had better say at once that he is a nuisance, a bore, and a worry. As you are likely, however, to meet him whenever you meet Kit Beresford, this explanation is necessary. He is an amateur artist (you have all, no doubt, met that awful thing), and a groveller at the feet of Kit, who treats him with a fine disdain that it does one's heart good to see. Just at this moment (having been engaged in a warlike contest with him, in which she has come off a glorious victor), she is leaning back in her seat, staring at the stage. The curtain has again risen.

"Just look at that man's legs," she says, suddenly.

This extraordinary remark, having had no usher of any sort, so surprises Mr. Mannering that it reduces him to imbecility.

"Eh?" he says, vaguely.

"His legs!" repeats Miss Beresford, sturdily, and as though she scorns to explain.

"Whose legs?" asks he. "I don't see."

"Do you know it has often occurred to me that you ought to wear spectacles, you see so few things!" says Miss Beresford, mildly. She has been slowly turning her head in his direction whilst speaking, but now, having caught a full view of his face, her tone changes. "Good gracious!" she says, sharply, "where are you looking? At the stalls? Do you suppose I come to look at people I can see any night I like at a ball? Look at the boards, and you will see the legs I speak of." She nods her head lightly in the direction of a helplessly lanky man, clad as a peasant.

"Well, I don't see very much in his legs," he says, rather nettled by her tone.

"That's just it," returns she, with a low rippling laugh. "There's nothing in them. For once"—with a swift glance at him, that restores his self-love—"we find a point on which we can agree."

So elated by her smile as to grow rash, he stoops forward and says, tenderly,—

"There is another point on which if we could only agree, I should be the hap——"

"Don't!" says Miss Beresford, so severely that he shuts up as if with a spring. "I hate 'other points'!"

This crushes him; but in a few minutes he is so far recovered as to be able to say, gloomily,—

"If you made me a point, I could understand you."

"I couldn't do that," says Kit, somewhat wearily. She has been looking at the door very frequently during the past half-hour, and now the faintest shadow of disappointment is curving her pretty lip.

"Why?" demands he, somewhat angrily.

"You aren't sharp enough," returns she, with a little irrepressible laugh, in spite of her depression.

"Oh, I dare say I'm a fool in your eyes," says Mannering, in a miserable sort of way. He is indeed so honestly unhappy that she relents.

"No, no," she says, sweetly, almost caressingly. "In my eyes you are—yes—— Do you know," with a sudden startling change of tone, "I can't bear those nasty caustic people who think themselves clever that one meets at times?—can you? They say such unpleasant things to one, and mean them, too."

"Still, I don't know," says Mr. Mannering, despondently. "You are so bright yourself that there are many things you must hate—about certain people, who——"

"And many things I must love, too," interrupts Kit, who, it must be confessed, is *tant soit peu coquette.* "For instance——"

Exactly at this moment the door of their box is opened, and Mr. Desmond enters, accompanied by a young man, about three years younger than himself,—that is, twenty-five, or so.

He is a tall young man, of a very cheerful countenance and aristocratic bearing. Though by no means *posé* as a satisfactory model for the love-sick swain, there is still something about the new-comer that declares him Cupid's prey and a very earnest servant of the Court of Love.

There is in his dark eyes an expression at once dreamy, restless, discontented, yet ecstatic, that betrays him. These same dark eyes search hurriedly the box until they come to Kit, and there find rest. So great a gladness fills them as they fall on her that all the world might know that the slender maiden who is returning his glance in kind is "his life's ladye, and his sovërain."

The marquis, feeling the box to be overcrowded, signs to Clontarf and Dicky Browne to make their adieux. Going up himself to Miss Costello, he bends over her:

"May I hope," he says, with his most courteous smile, "that if I call on you to-morrow I shall have a chance of seeing you?"

"I shall be at home to-morrow until five o'clock," says Doris, calmly.

"Ah! now I have something to which to look forward," says the marquis, gallantly. "May I bring my son with me? he is"—with a presumably happy forgetfulness of all previous arrangements—"most desirous of turning this fortunate acquaintance with you into a lasting friendship."

"Is he? Since when?" asks the girl, coldly, yet so softly and with so pretty a smile as takes the sting from her words. Still, though hidden, it is there, and Lord Dundeady is too clever a student of human nature to miss it.

"Since that moment when first he saw you from the opposite box," he says, readily, unmoved. "Then I may bring him?"

"He can come," says Miss Costello, briefly, though still with wonderful sweetness.

Clontarf, who has heard all, shrugs his shoulders slightly. Then he, too, bends over her hand, and, with a last lingering glance at her emotionless features, bows himself out of the box.

Presently the piece comes to an end, and Mrs. Desmond's party make their way to their carriages. As Kit has elected to go home with Miss Costello, the Desmonds find themselves presently rolling swiftly along beneath the quiet stars *tête-à-tête*.

"What a tremendous time it seems now, Brian, since we were married!" says Mrs. Desmond, after a lengthened silence.

"To me," says Mr. Desmond, with a reproachful air, "it seems but as yesterday. What a terribly dull time you must have put in, my poor child, during these past two years to make you speak in that feeling tone! With what patience and silent endurance you have been dragging out your miserable existence!"

"Oh, nonsense!" says Mrs. Desmond. Another profound silence; then—

"Brian."

"If you are going to make a second unkind remark, I give you warning I shall cry," says Brian.

"Well, I won't. I was only going to say that I do think Doris Costello is the prettiest girl I know."

"She isn't the prettiest girl *I* know," says Brian, in a tone so satisfactory that Mrs. Desmond tucks herself even more comfortably into his embrace and rubs her soft cheek against his.

"I won't have you looking up pretty girls," she says, whereupon he very properly tells her she is a hypocrite.

"I don't think Miss Costello is the prettiest girl Brabazon knows, either," says Mr. Desmond, with a little laugh, after a minute or two. Brabazon is the name of the

tall young man whose dark eyes had told their tale to Kit an hour ago.

"It doesn't matter what Mr. Brabazon thinks," says Monica, in an appallingly stiff tone, for her.

"Eh? Why, I thought you quite liked him," says her husband. "I've asked him to Cork for the partridge-shooting."

"Oh! I hope not, dearest," says Monica, sitting quite upright, and regarding him with a distracted countenance.

"I'm afraid I have indeed, old mouse," says Brian, whose stock of names kept for his wife's sole use is of the rarest and most *recherché* kind. "And why not? He's the straightest shot in the country, and a fellow of good family, and—er—that——"

"And hasn't a farthing!" says Mrs. Desmond, in despair.

"That's absurd. He must have a good many farthings. He goes everywhere, and his tailor is evidently all right, though Kit says it's his figure. I didn't think you would be the one to turn your back upon a fellow just because his uncle had chosen to marry at seventy-five and leave him—well, considerably out of it."

"I'm not turning my back on any one," she says, indignantly. "And as for poor young men, why, I actually prefer them. They are always ever so much nicer."

"Then why don't you prefer Brabazon? He's an old friend of mine, and——"

"Is in love with Kit," with a sigh that amounts to the dignity of a groan.

"Not at all; you take my word for it now: he just admires her a little, but it will blow over, and nothing will come of it. Don't be worrying your little brains—your *very* little brains—about him."

"This much has already come of it," says Mrs. Desmond, with the calmness of despair: "he proposed to her yesterday."

"No! you don't say so!" says Brian, as completely taken aback as even she can desire. "I assure you I never saw a bit of it."

"Oh, dear blind bat! when did you ever see anything?" says his wife. "But that is not all: there is still worse to come."

"I think I should prefer having it all together," says her husband, mildly, "but go on."

"Kit is in love with *him!*"

"But that's not worse," says the obtuse Brian. "It's the most natural thing that could happen. He is just the sort of fellow that women, as a rule, do fall in love with."

"Well, I shouldn't," says Mrs. Desmond, severely.

"Well, my dear, I devoutly hope not," returns her husband.

At this moment the carriage draws up at their hall door.

CHAPTER III.

"Thy birth and hers they be no thing égal."

THERE is a universal and friendly (if rather grasping) "uncle" of whom much is known; of Miss Costello's "aunt" (though she is almost as formidable a relative) as yet little is known. This seems hard on Miss Costello's aunt. I haste to correct the injustice.

Latē in life a Mr. Michael Costello, brother to my heroine's father, took to wife a certain spinster about whose age at allevents there wasn't the smallest uncertainty. He did not, naturally, long survive the union.

When he "was dead, and laid in the grave," and when his brother—the father of Doris—had also finally retired from business and entered that narrow house out of which not all his riches could avail to rescue him, Michael's wife declared her intention of looking up her nieces, "the Costello girls," as she called them.

"Looking up" meant bringing herself, her parrot, her lapdog, and her maid, to Fitzwilliam Square (where they then lived in Dublin), and declaring to them her fixed intention of seeing to their interests and residing in their house for the future. There was no gainsaying her word. It was law. From that luckless hour until now, she had clung to them, and had constituted herself their guardian and their scourge.

Fortunately, there were but two girls, or she might have been even less bearable. Vera, the youngest, she had sent forthwith to an extremely select establishment in Switzerland, where only six young ladies were admitted, and where they were all treated as members of the family. They were, too, allowed "a certain freedom."

"So much the better," said Mrs. Costello when reading the advertisement. "I hate a missish girl, or a prig: they never go off successfully."

So Vera was sent to Switzerland, and found the advertisement (unlike most others) strictly within the lines of truth. The freedom was decidedly "certain;" and, if being treated as a member of the family meant doing just as you

liked, nothing could have been more honest and above board.

That Doris should marry early, and nothing less than a baronet, with her face and money, was her aunt's next decision. A baronet was her highest hope for the beautiful but low-born girl; therefore her joy (though secret) was unbounded when Lord Cloutarf was put forward by his father as a possible suitor for her niece.

Doris, in her cold fashion, when the matter was laid before her, had consented to think of it. Indeed, the idea propounded so exactly jumped with her own inclinations that she saw small cause to combat it. An innate sense of breeding, and a desire for the beautiful, born with her, had raised her far above the class from which she had sprung; instinctively she hated and shrank from her low surroundings; and, dwelling in a world of thought into which no one might enter, she daily taught herself that the first great good to be attained was an established place in society, and that love when compared with this was worthless, or at least a minor good.

To sell herself, therefore, to the highest bidder (when rank was in the field) was her earnest, if unexpressed, determination ever since she woke to a knowledge of the vulgarity of her associates and the power of money. Her father would not ignore those who had befriended him in the days of his struggling with blind fortune, but she even in those early days had refused to know or mix with them so that, virtually, she lived a life of almost total seclusion until old Costello's death. Then came the aunt, Mrs. Costello, and several years of travel.

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The clock has just chimed four; a frivolous cuckoo, that in the vanity of its heart has taken to pigments, has darted from some mysterious unknown and clapped four times its carmined wings. Miss Costello, laying down her crewel-work, sighs quickly, involuntarily; whereupon her aunt lays down her work and regards her closely.

"You remind me of that idiotic person who used to sit in a damp house and wish that she was dead," she says, sharply. "You do the love-sick maiden to perfection; it is a pity you can't feel it. Are you so eager for a coronet that you must needs look at the clock twenty times in a minute and sigh so loud that all the world might hear?"

"Did I sigh?" says Doris.

"Yes, 'like a furnace.' He'll come fast enough without your sighs, if he wants your money, and he'll stay away if he doesn't: your *beaux yeux* have not the attraction for him that your guineas have. Like father like son; and that old man's mind is filled with a desire for riches,—our riches.

He'll come, I suppose,—the son, I mean,—and, now that you have gained your object through me, I dare say you will want to get rid of me."

Her voice is sharp and exasperating, her expression sour in the extreme; but there is nothing about her that denotes ill-breeding, either in face or figure. She is spare, lean, meagre, it is true; her shoulder-points stick out obtrusively, her bones seem to rattle as she moves, but her features are fine and regular, and she might be even termed a pretty old woman did but a different soul dwell within her. Her eyes are dark and piercing as a hawk's, her nose is like a beak, her complexion yellow as a kite's claw: altogether, she painfully resembles a superannuated bird of prey.

"You know it is my desire that you should always live with me," says Doris, coldly.

"Oh, well, that's from the teeth out, I dare say. There is small love lost upon me by you. However," with an ungrateful sniff, "I am thankful to say I need be dependent upon nobody. Michael did me so much good."

This is indeed true. Michael (thus she always alludes to her defunct husband, not as "my poor husband," as others might, but sternly, uncompromisingly, by his Christian name, as though he were still in the flesh and the next room),—Michael, having prospered in worldly matters only a degree less than his brother, had left her residuary legatee to his large fortune.

"I dare say, now," she goes on, "that old man Dundeady thinks he will be able to shunt me when he makes you 'my lady.'"

"I am sure such an idea never entered his head."

"It would be just like him, then."

"Why? He strikes me as being a particularly gentlemanly old man."

"An old scarecrow! with mincing manners and a fourteenth-century smile. Pah! He ought to wear a periwig, and a patch here and there; but he is so patched up already there wouldn't be room for another. He apes juvenility, and believes his face his fortune still. I have no patience with such senility. You have, though: you encourage his affectations, and make much of him just because he has a handle to his name."

Doris winces, and flushes warmly; she even opens her mouth as if to speak, but resolutely restrains herself. She shuts her fan with a sharp click, and leans back in her chair with an unusual touch of haste, but gives no other evidence of emotion. Years have taught her that argument in present company is of no avail.

"Why, his airs and graces would make the fortune of a third-rate actress," goes on Mrs. Costello, with a snort of

defiance. "And he thought to overawe *me*, did he? He came to the wrong shop, I can tell him. He's a very poor creature when all is told. Truckling at the feet of a *parvenue* to secure her 'filthy lucre' for his son!"

The girl grows still paler, and her hands clasp each other until the knuckles grow white, but not a word escapes her.

"He knows what I think of him; at least that is a comfort," goes on this terrible old woman. "He has given up doing 'George the Fourth,' or the 'greatest gentleman in Europe' business, for my benefit. He knows I can read him like a book, and that Anna Costello is not to be crushed or befooled by the Pope himself."

"Anything fresh in the papers to-day?" says Doris, abruptly, with a faint hope of turning the conversation from its present channel.

"Yes; that arch-hypocrite Gladstone has a cold in his nose: aren't you sorry? Be sure, now, you say a prayer for him to-night. Bless me! why, it is quite a quarter-past four! High time for your intended to pay his visit, if he means coming to-day."

"He is not my intended yet," says Doris, with a slight contraction of her brows.

"He will be, if his father can manage it. But the young man is slow about accepting his happiness,—that I must say. Still, something tells me that the old fellow, with his bows and his smirks and his honeyed words, will persuade him into it, even against his will."

Still the girl controls herself, and sits apparently emotionless, though every pulse in her body is throbbing with absolute pain.

"Grimacing old ape," goes on her tormentor, still apostrophizing the unfortunate marquis. "I took the curl out of his smiles, I warrant you. Why, your father was twice the man he is, although I do remember the time when he ran barefooted about Dublin as a little chap, carrying a hod for the masons in Merrion Square!"

The girl's hand closes convulsively upon the fan she holds, until the delicate ivory snaps; she shivers as if with cold, and shrinks still farther back into her lounging-chair. Is she never to be allowed to forget these hateful details of the past? To Mrs. Costello this nervous horror of a broadened account of earlier days is as apparent as is the day.

"Oh, you needn't sneer at your father's memory," she says, wrinkling up her Wellington nose disdainfully. "But for him you would be in queer street to-day. Small chance of being my lady you would have had but for the soap, in spite of your pretty face,—though that's too milk-and-watery for my taste,—and for Clontarf's too, as it seems: 'money makes the mare go,' we all know. And

you may thank your vulgar old father for the position in which you find yourself to-day."

"I was not sneering at my father's memory," says Doris, in a choked voice, and with a very sad face. The effort to subdue her rising temper has been almost too much for her.

Fortunately, just at this moment a servant enters with Lord Clontarf's card.

"Eh? at last!" says Mrs. Costello. "My word! but he took his time to it! If he asks you to marry him to-day, Doris, what will you say?"

"Yes," briefly.

"Well, that shows there is not much pride about you. One should admire you for that, of course; but in my days things were different; and there is such a thing as proper pride, I've heard. Eh, dear? but you're a poor sort to place your dependence upon a man who candidly declares he wants you only for what he can get out of you."

"It was you arranged this marriage," says the girl, turning upon her suddenly with an excess of passion that for once cows the virulent old dame. "Do you now seek to dissuade me from it? If so, say but one word, and I shall give him his dismissal. He is less to me than the veriest beggar that crawls the earth."

"Ay, a beggar, truly," says her aunt, unable even in her terror to forego this retort. "But I do not dissuade you from the marriage;" she says this hurriedly, though hating to give in. "I rather counsel you to it. It is the best thing you can do. You hate the mire from which you sprung; therefore climb out of it, by fair means or by foul. And he, in what wise is he better than you in this matter? You marry him for rank; he, you, for money. Your beauty is as dross in his eyes compared with the clink of your gold. In this affair he is as false as yourself."

"Nay, as honest," says Doris; then, with a step slow, but firm, she walks down the room, and, opening a door at its lower end, enters the room beyond.

Here she finds Clontarf awaiting her.

He is standing, and as she comes to him moves quickly towards her. Reaching her, he takes her hand and holds it closely. He is very pale, and is evidently nervous. It is, of course, an awkward moment for both, and he, being the man, shows it most. There is, indeed, something of entreaty in his glance, a dumb desire that she will meet him half-way in the overcoming of his difficulties. His pallor, and this air of self-depreciation, add another charm to his handsome face.

There is something, indeed, so frank in the appeal of his eyes that her heart would have softened to him instantly

had he been any other man or come on any other errand. As it is, she stands before him, cold and self-contained, and at her very worst,—though tears are very near her, and her heart is beating wildly.

Still holding her hand very tightly, because of his agitation, he says, gently,—

"My father has given me to understand that—that there is some hope for me."

"Your father has doubtless told you that I am willing to buy your title with my fortune," replies she, with a faint flicker of her white lids. She has sworn to herself that there shall be no petty pretences about this business-affair.

"If you wish to put it so," says Clontarf, a little coldly. He drops her hand. To him, prejudiced as he already is against her, this speech of hers is a *bêtise*, an outcoming of that coarseness arising from her fatal association with soap, or herrings, or whatever it was.

"I do wish it," says Miss Costello, firmly, standing a little back from him, and clasping her hands behind her back. "Let us speak the honest truth at first: it will save trouble afterwards. I am tired of my early associations; I abhor them. To escape from them I am willing to pay a high price; and you—are willing to accept it. *You* are in difficulties of one sort, I of another. It seems we can accommodate each other. The bargain between us, therefore, is quite fair."

"I hope I may conclude from your words," says Clontarf, courteously, "that you accept me."

"Yes, my lord," says Doris. As she says this, she holds out to him with open unwillingness a beautiful hand, small and slender, which he, as in duty bound, takes within his own. He presses it slightly, but cannot bring himself to raise it to his lips. Indeed, he would have had hardly time to do so, as she withdraws it with a haste almost ungracious.

"I would have you, too, remember," she says, hastily, "that in future there will be no occasion for recrimination between us. We know why and for what reason this marriage is about to be contracted between us. There is no question of love: therefore——"

She pauses.

"I see what you mean," says Clontarf, calmly. "In the future, neither you nor I shall have any right to reproach each other with lack of tenderness, and so forth. But you hasten events; might it not be possible that in time——"

She stops him by putting out her hand with an impatient gesture.

"Let us have none of that," she says, contemptuously.

A pause ensues. Then,—

"I think I said 'Yes' to your proposal, a moment since, prematurely," she says, thoughtfully. "There are many points still to be discussed, that may change it into a 'No.' First, my income; it is forty thousand pounds a year,—rather more,—and what I propose is, that you shall have half of it in your own undisputed possession, I the other half in mine."

"You are determined to make it indeed a business affair," says Clontarf, frowning. "If so, let me tell you I cannot consent to accept more than a quarter of your income."

"I prefer you should have the half; let us share it equally," returns she, coldly. "Twenty thousand pounds a year shall be yours absolutely to do with as you will. I too shall do as I will with the rest. That is a very good arrangement, as it seems to me."

Clontarf looks at her curiously. She is perfectly composed and undisturbed. Her low voice is as soft and musical as though she were discussing the last new novel or opera, instead of her whole future life. Only her face shows a deadly pallor, and the purple rings that encircle her eyes betray the mental agitation she is enduring. He would have spoken, but she stops him.

"There is another thing," she says. "My sister is now at school in Switzerland, but when she returns her home must be with me."

"Of course our sister will live with us," says Clontarf, kindly.

Involuntarily she lifts her eyes to his for a brief moment, then they fall again. A little flush creeps into her cheeks, and a rush of passionate gratitude illumines her face. Then all fades, and she is emotionless again. She sinks into a chair, and moves her fan idly to and fro in the old tired, insolent fashion.

"That is good of you," she says, indifferently. "But there is still more to come. Besides a sister I have an aunt."

Now (off and on) he has heard so much about this aunt from his father that at the mention of her name he quails,—imperceptibly, as he hopes, but the hope is in vain. From beneath those wonderful lashes that seem to shield her eyes completely, she sees more than he knows.

"She will not trouble you much," she says. "She will have her own apartments; she prefers that; and she has been very good to me,—at times,—and——"

She hesitates.

"I know," says Clontarf, hurriedly: "she is poor, and it is therefore all the more necessary that you should be kind to her."

"No," with a slight shrug of her shoulders; "she is rich; almost as rich as I am. But she has no friends except me —and Vera. Vera," with a wonderful gleam of tenderness that transfigures her face, "is my sister. I have no one else but these two to plead for. There is," with a sad little smile, "but one happy point about my deplorable want of birth, and that is my want of relatives. That should count with you: Vera and Mrs. Costello are literally all the sisters and cousins and aunts I possess."

"I wish you would not excuse yourself to me like this," says Clontarf, moved in spite of himself by the moisture in her eyes.

"And now there is just one thing more," says the girl, rising, and growing even a shade paler. "I am selling myself to you for a title, and you to me for money, but"—throwing out her arms with a touch of passion—"*for that only:* why need there be anything else in our bargain? You understand me? you *must*," with an amount of anxiety that borders upon agony.

The full meaning of her words dawning slowly upon him so completely overwhelms him with surprise that for a moment he is silent. It is a moment just too long. She covers her face with her hands.

"Oh, it is hard that I must say all this for myself," she says, in a stifled tone of shame and angry reproach.

"I know what you mean," he says, confusedly,—"that we shall be husband and wife in name only. But consider: this," gravely, "is a step that once taken is difficult of recovery. And—what will the world say?"

"Why need the world know?" exclaims she, eagerly. Her hands have fallen from her face, and she has come a degree nearer to him. The mask of indifference has fallen from her beautiful face, and for the first time he sees all the earnestness of which it is capable.

"There are such things as servants," says Donat, gently. "Still,"—seeing the shadow that crosses her face,—"as you have taken this idea so much to heart, I am willing to defy the world with you."

"You consent, then," she says, with a sigh of the most intense relief. "I thank you. You have given me back my self-respect. You don't understand that, perhaps, but you have. Now, indeed, it is an honorable sale between us two. You shall be free to come and go as you like, and I shall be free too. But, wherever my freedom may lead me, I shall give you back upon my death-bed your name as clean as when I took it."

Great tears stand in her azure eyes.

"To see you is to know that," says Clontarf, quietly. Then, after a slight pause, "You will marry me soon?"

"Whenever you like.'

"Next month, then? will that hurry you too much?"

"No, I think not. I dare say if I make a point of it I shall be ready by then."

"And where will you like to go? we must arrange that, I suppose. So many questions are asked. Rome? Spain? Norway?"

"I should like Paris," she says, a little timidly. "We need only stay there a short time: you would like to be home for the shooting, would you not?—and—we both know Paris so well that we cannot be bored there."

"True." A grim smile crosses his face: there is, however, a touch of amusement in it. To hear one's bride providing against that king of terrors, boredom, is in itself unique. "Everything shall be exactly as you wish it," he says, in a friendly tone. "Come," smiling, "you must not begin by regarding me as an ogre. It must be bad to have to take a husband at all on such terms as ours, but——"

"Or a wife either," murmurs she, her eyes very sad and prophetic.

"I shall feel ashamed if you compare our relative positions," says Clontarf, gently. "Do not force me to acknowledge, what I already know, that on all points I have the best of the bargain. Do not be ungenerous."

"I have many things to thank you for," she says, slowly.

"Well, now I think we have pretty nearly arranged everything," says Donat, cheerfully. "In the future, friendship, I hope, lies before us: let us begin it now." He takes her hand again, and, bending over it, presses his lips to it very lightly. It is as cold as death. She smiles faintly. She looks utterly weary and overdone.

"Now I must go," says Clontarf, seeing her ever-increasing pallor.

"Good-by," she says, calmly. As he leaves her and walks down the room to the door, she still stands erect, and as he makes her a final salutation at the door she smiles again, and even manages to return his bow. Then, as the door closes on him, she gives way, and, sinking into a chair, covers her face with her hands and bursts into tears.

"She is handsome, but an icicle," says Clontarf to himself, as he slowly descends the stairs. "So much the better for her, as I should certainly never have been able to fall in love with her. She is without feeling, and much too difficult. All things considered, her little arrangement, if slightly embarrassing, is a very sensible one."

Thus musing, he turns an angle of the staircase, and finds himself unexpectedly face to face with an old woman.

She is evidently a little lame, because she supports her-

self with an ebony walking-cane, and keeps one hand upon the banisters besides. She looks keenly at the young man out of two dark piercing eyes, and by a gesture brings him to a stand-still.

"Well, and how has your wooing sped?" she asks, sharply.

Clontarf, amazed, stares at her in turn.

"I really cannot remember," he says, hesitatingly, "that I have ever had the——"

"No, you have never had the pleasure of my acquaintance until now," interrupts she, brusquely, "and a very little of it, let me tell you, young man, would use up all the pleasure. Your father will agree with me there. He knows me, or thinks he does, and I know him, and what his value is, which in truth isn't worth talking about! My name is Costello, and it is my niece with whom you were conversing just now. Well, as I have now satisfied your nicety, answer my question. Is it yes or no with her? Have you brought matters to a crisis at last? How have you sped? Eh?"

"Madam," returns Clontarf, gravely, "your niece has done me the honor of accepting my hand." He is not at all sure whether he is amused or angry.

"And you have done her the honor of accepting her fortune," snarls the old woman, giving her stick a thump upon the floor. "And now, doubtless, you and your precious father think you are at liberty to make ducks and drakes of it, and that you have bought it dear enough by bartering for it your barren title. But I tell you no, *no*, NO!" with three more emphatic thumps of the ebony stick. "*I'll* see that her money isn't squandered. It was hardly and honestly earned, and shall be kept for her for whom it was intended. I'll fight, step by step, and penny by penny, any rascally lawyers your father may choose to send me about settlement. I'm her guardian in a certain sense, and I'll see her righted. So let that old dandy beware."

"Madam," says Clontarf.

"Hold your tongue," says Mrs. Costello. "I'm not afraid of you either, though *you* are young and handsome. And as for your father, tell him to be prepared. I shall circumvent him on every point. I give him fair warning. Let him know from me," flourishing the stick again, "that *my mind is made up.*"

"I assure you, madam," begins Clontarf, haughtily: there is no difficulty about deciding between the amusement and the anger now: he is literally fuming with rage.

"You needn't," interrupts she again, contemptuously: "on this subject I shall assure myself. Don't give your-

self any trouble, my good boy: I'm equal to the occasion. There! go,—and," severely, "tell that old man your father that Anna Costello has her eye on him!"

With this she hobbles away from him, and mounts with difficulty three steps. There, however, she pauses, and looks down again upon the stricken if indignant Clontarf.

"Tell him, too," she says, in her grating voice, "that he may as well give up the powder and patches and juvenile airs now, because the wrinkles of seventy don't go well with 'em, and he's that if he's a day."

With this last gentle thrust she disappears.

"What an abominable old harridan!" says Clontarf, when he has recovered sufficient energy even to think again. "And so this is my aunt! I see I am to gain something by my marriage besides money." Here he descends a step or two, but slowly and thoughtfully, and finally stops short again.

"Bless me," he says, with a sudden rush of pity, "what a wretched life she must have led that poor girl up-stairs!" He seems really distressed, but being Irish, quick change in his mood is a necessity to him, and presently he bursts out laughing.

"How she does love the governor!" he says. "His 'juvenile airs!'"—mimicking her tone,—"ha! ha! 'tis a pity not to tell him of it; only if they came together afterwards there might be bloodshed. And as for me! why,"—here his unfilial hilarity dies a sudden death,—"she accused me of—she insinuated that—that—oh!—*really*, now you know!" says Clontarf, indignantly, as though appealing to an imaginary audience; after which, pulling himself together with an angry shrug, he runs rapidly down the stairs and precipitates himself into his cab.

CHAPTER IV.

"Love will not be constrained by mastery."

To-day, though slumberous August has just given place to golden September, the sun is burning as fiercely and madly as in those lusty days of his youth when he made love to languid July.

Every blade and leaf is quivering beneath the intensity of its regard; a yellow mist is hanging over the distant sea. The cattle far away in the fields are lowing piteously; some, more fortunate than others, knee-deep in water, are chewing the cud contentedly, regardless of their sisters'

complainings; a little petulant wind is dancing through the shrubberies, making a tender music as it goes, and adding another harmony where

> "Every sound is sweet,—
> Myriads of rivulets hurrying through the lawn,
> The moan of doves in immemorial elms,
> And murmuring of innumerable bees."

All these sweet sounds, and more, fall dreamily upon the ear to-day.

It is still summer; there is not a thought of autumn, or death, or decay, in all the genial air. Some late roses climbing up the veranda of Kilmalooda—the residence of Lord and Lady Clontarf—are hanging their heads wearily because of the unwonted heat, and are crying sadly in their dumb fashion to be plucked and carried in-doors to the cool and shaded rooms beyond.

Kilmalooda is old, grand, and massive. It had originally belonged to an impecunious Irish peer, but had been thrown into the Landed Estates Court, and pulled out of it again by old Costello, who, having tired of the novelty of a fashionable house in town, had decided on trying the effect of a country residence—a "baronial residence," he always called it—upon his neighbors and associates.

Kilmalooda being in the market, and having been the property of "a real swell" (old Costello again), he bought it, lands, furniture, live-stock, everything, just as it stood. The furniture, however, being old, dark, subdued, and absolutely priceless in its way, was an abomination in the eyes of its new master, who had a hankering after gilding and glass, and indeed a generally lively taste on most matters. He had actually given directions for the remodelling of the house inside, and for the introduction into it of many impossible articles, calculated to make weak eyes water and stout hearts quail, when kindly death stepped in to the rescue and carried him off to a land where, let us hope, gilding is unknown.

A balcony, reached by marble steps, runs along all one side of the house; it is up this the roses are creeping, and it is on to this that just now Lady Clontarf steps lightly. Pushing aside the frail lace curtains of the drawing-room window, she comes from the dusk of the shaded room within to the bright and dazzling warmth of the open air.

She is clad in a soft blue clinging gown,—a blue so pale, indeed, as to be almost white. Her eyes are bright and clear, and full of the day's content. Her lips are smiling. She has now been three weeks Lady Clontarf. Her brief honeymoon has come to an end, and yesterday she returned to her old home. No cloud is in her sky, no suspicion of

evil in her heart. She and her husband are as good friends as any one could desire. As though the beauty and freshness of the day have entered into her soul, she throws off the air of cold indifference that has grown almost habitual to her, and lets her lips part in a little happy song. She has gained the topmost rung of her ladder; her ambition is satisfied. She has, she tells herself, all she was determined to obtain,—rank, position, the consideration of the world.

The scent of the sad roses is stealing up to her, the murmuring of a tiny burn in the garden below as it tumbles over its brown pebbles reaches her ear. Far, far down below, the smoke from the tiny village of Rossmoyne rises up in thin gray-blue columns and quivers in the ambient air. How fair a world it is, how sweet, how tranquil!

"Poor dad," she says to herself, with a smile that ends in a sigh. "How pleased he would be if he could only see me now!"

And then, somehow, she falls to thinking of how, if he were alive now, he would be going about boasting to everybody, in that loud voice of his, of "my son-in-law Lord Clontarf, and my noble relative the marquis,—my girl's father-in-law, don't you know?"

At this she grows a little hot, and her pale cheeks deepen in tint; she draws her breath quickly, she is conscious of a positive sense of relief in the knowledge that it is now forever out of his power to so offend, or to bring that horrible sense of shame home to her. Then follows a sharp pang of keenest self-reproach, and she upbraids herself bitterly for the cruelty of the thought that could make cause for rejoicing out of a father's death,—a father who, with all his faults, had at least never been anything but kind to her. A sigh escapes her, and the glad light dies from her eyes. The sun seems to have faded a little, the brook runs but slowly, and all the music is gone from it. Her eyes as she gazes at the distant ocean are full of tears. A moment since she had been glad and exultant, now "her joy to sorrow flits."

A servant, approaching, hands her a packet.

"With Lord Dundeady's compliments, my lady, and, as he is driving over here in about an hour's time, he hopes you will permit him to take luncheon with you."

The marquis's home—Dundeady Castle—is situated about six miles from Kilmalooda.

Doris having given him an answer, the man retires. Turning the packet over and over in her pretty slender hands, she wonders curiously what can be in it. She and her father-in-law as yet have been but bare acquaintances to each other, and this little message from him lying still

unopened on her palm may mean to her nothing at all or a very great deal. Its coming has already done her good. It has roused her from her remorseful revery. Almost she has forgotten her melancholy of a moment since, and her lips have recovered their pleased expression. As yet that little toy, her title, has not lost for her its first freshness, and she thinks of it again (now that the servant in his address has reminded her of it) with a certain amount of satisfied vanity. Then she breaks the seal of the packet.

Opening the morocco case it contains, she gazes upon a very ancient and exquisitely lovely diamond necklet, that glitters and sparkles in the brilliant sunlight so as to almost put the rays of Phœbus's self to shame. A few words in Lord Dundeady's writing are folded up inside the cover of the case: taking them out, she reads them hurriedly:

"Rummaging in an old bureau just now, I found this. It *was* my grandmother's, it *is* yours,—with my love! I compliment it, in thinking it *almost* fine enough to rest upon your neck."

Thus the old beau. Doris, delighted both with the gift and the note, laughs aloud.

"Eh? What is this I hear?" cries a shrill voice from behind the curtains. They part again, and the old woman Mrs. Costello, supported by her stick, hobbles into sight. "Murdoch tells me that grimacing old fool is coming to luncheon. What for now, I wonder? What does he want to beg, borrow, or steal? Eh? What's that in your hand, Doris? You're hiding something from me. Yes, you are! I am not blind yet, though I dare say many a one would have me so. What bauble is that?"

"A present from the marquis," says Doris, holding it out in both her hands, that her aunt may see it in all its excessive beauty. "A diamond necklet that belonged to his grandmother. Is it not charming? Is it not kind of him?"

"Diamonds!" says Mrs. Costello, regarding with contemptuous disbelief the exquisite thing that lies glittering in Doris's palm. "Where would *he* get diamonds at this time o' day? Now, mark my words, the little of 'em he ever had are sold or mortgaged this many a year. His grandmother's, forsooth! It's time now he forgot he ever had a grandmother! Diamonds, said he? Ay," begrudgingly, "Irish diamonds, it may be: any one would know by the look of them they weren't the genuine things."

Angry and disheartened, Doris closes the jewel-case, and turns away.

"Ay, ay, ay," snarls the old woman, vehemently. "Turn from me now to your grand new relations. Quite right; quite right; my lord the Marquis of Carabas has claims on your filial duty, no doubt! Go with the tide, girl, and

forget what—— Eh?" with a brisk change of tone, "what's that? Wheels, wasn't it? That's the old deceiver, I suppose." She hobbles towards one of the doors, and then stops again. "Don't think I'm running from him," she says: "with your good leave, my lady, I'll see him before he leaves, and tell him again what I think of him. Warn him of that, with my love—Eh? Eh? Do you hear? with my love."

Cackling and nodding, she beats a retreat, and Doris, with a sigh of relief, hears the door close behind her. Yet the sound of the wheels did not emanate from Lord Dundeady's chariot; and Doris, having ascertained this fact from a window that overlooks the avenue, turns once again to the contemplation of his present.

She slips it round her neck, and, standing with folded hands before a mirror, sways her body gently to and fro, to make the gems catch the light, and is delighted with the effect, and indeed with herself too.

Then she wonders, when the old nobleman comes, in what fitting words will she thank him, and makes up the dearest little speech in the world for his edification, which she totally forgets an hour afterwards, when the necessity for it arises. She adds up, too, indifferently, the chances for and against Clontarf being in in time to see his father, and then she yawns a little, and, going out again to the balcony, sinks into a low chair and falls into a musing trance once more.

This evening Vera, the little sister she has not seen for four long years, will be with her. A sense of joy at the approaching reunion fills her heart. *Then* Vera was fourteen, now she must be very nearly eighteen. Why, quite a woman!

Lady Clontarf smiles as she pictures a grown-up Vera. Such a little baby of a thing as she was when last they were together, all soft yellow curls, and rosy lips, and eyes so blue and innocent that they suggested heaven and its sky. A strange idea that she is old enough to be Vera's mother has taken possession of her. Yet in reality there are but two short years between them.

Kit Beresford and Vera must be about the same age. Doris hopes earnestly they may be friends. But even Kit will be older in most ways than her Bébé, as she generally calls Vera. She will never be very old, dear Bébé, she is so childish, so laughter-loving, so gay! Why, her letters even now are vague enough to drive any solemn person out of her wits. Yes, Kit will teach her to be sensible, dear little innocent tender Vera.

So thinking, Doris lets her eyes wander thoughtfully over the glowing landscape before her, past the swelling lawns

and stately trees to where in the far distance Coole lies basking in the sunshine, with the high hills of Carrigfoddha on its left, and the sun rushing in soft streams across the valleys on its right. The river, too, running at its feet, and flowing past Moyne House, looks like a gleaming band of silver in the glowing light.

At Coole live Mr. and Mrs. Desmond, with their uncle, The Desmond. As a rule, Kit Beresford too is always to be found there, though her home is commonly supposed to be with her aunts, Miss Priscilla and Miss Penelope Blake, at Moyne,—a pretty old house about half a mile farther away.

Just now, not only Kit but two or three other people are staying at Coole,—Dicky Browne for the shooting, Neil Brabazon and Mr. Mannering for Kit,—the latter openly, the former surreptitiously, his suit being by no means so favorably received by Kit's sister Mrs. Desmond as that of his richer rival Mr. Mannering. How Kit means to receive it is a more important matter still, and one as yet hedged round by doubt, though perhaps there have been certain rare moments when—when——

Miss Beresford is roaming through the gardens of Coole at this moment, with a rather discontented expression upon her mignonne face; she is alone, all the men having been carried off shooting, *bon gré mal gré*, by Brian Desmond. Yet it cannot be said she is altogether left to her own devices, being closely, though furtively, pursued at every step by the under-gardener, who regards her with mingled feelings of admiration and distrust.

"She has the purtiest face an' the softest tongue in the country, an' a touch of the 'com-ether' every way," says Mr. Doyle, when questioned about Kit. "But she plays the very divil wid me flowers."

His feelings reach positive agony now, as she stoops before a bed of late carnations, and, carelessly picking one of the beloved flowers, puts it with indifferent appreciation to her nose. Though apparently disparaging the virtues of the thing she has filched, she yet stoops as if to possess herself of its brother. This is one too much for Doyle.

"Miss Kit, miss, I beg yer pardon," he says, in a tone that trembles with agitation, "but I think the misthress wants them flowers for the dinner-table to-night or to-morrow."

"Carnations for the *épergne?*" says Kit, with widened eyes; "and to take the flowers from the *garden!* Why, she always has them from the conservatories," regarding him with manifest distrust.

"Generally, miss, it must be said. But only yestherday she laid her eyes on that there bed, an' said as how she

fancied them. If ye would condescend now, miss, to take a posy from any other bed, why——"

"Oh, certainly," says Kit, with a view to giving him the advantage of a most impartial judgment. "Strict justice he shall have," says Kit to herself, "but nothing more." She smiles grimly, and instantly pounces upon a bed of rare geraniums and culls its choicest treasure.

"Oh, not that, miss," cries Doyle, almost in tears. "The *masther* likes them. He wants to show them to the markis when he comes over. Ye wouldn't see the like o' them anywhere, miss, at this time o' year. 'Tis a pity, I will always say, that ye haven't studied the thing. There, now! an' on'y look at the size o' the flower in yer hand! why, 'twould have been twice that size to-morrow, an' the sun behavin' as it is for the last week! If you'd just kindly turn to another bed, miss, an'——"

"This one?" says Kit, directing her thieving attentions to an exquisite Gloire de Dijon rose-tree, that stands in a bed devoted entirely to himself. He deserves it: he is indeed a king among flowers.

"What a beauty at this time of year!" she says, genially; and, bending forward, she deliberately prepares to snip off one of the three last roses of summer that adorn it. Doyle springs forward.

"Oh, Miss Kit!" cries he. "Be the powers, 'twas well I stopped ye in time. The baby, Masther Brian inside, is that fond o' them roses that it wouldn't be wishin' for ye that ye touched one o' them. May blessings light upon him! faix, 'tis he himself, when Mrs. Moloney brings him this way, that stops just here, an'——"

"Baby!" says Kit, turning upon him sternly. "How can you quote him, Doyle, when you know he couldn't see the difference between a rose and a cabbage? I'm ashamed of you! Why don't you say at once that no one is to touch a flower in this garden, and be done with it? But such a subterfuge as that——! Do you suppose an infant of four months knows anything about roses? Now, do you, Doyle? Answer me that, if you can."

"I do declare to you, Miss Kit, that the cleverness o' that child passes belief. Ye wouldn't think it, now, to look at him, would ye? An' yet I think, but for the spakin' part of it, he's as knowin' as yerself."

"He is not," says Kit, indignantly; "and it is just to save your flowers you say all that. You are so mean about them that some day I am sure a blight will fall upon them and wither them all up."

This terrible prognostication, sounding to the superstitious Doyle like a curse, so cows and terrifies him that at once he resigns all hope of saving his heart's children,

and, involuntarily crossing himself to avert evil, moves backward and beats an ignominious retreat.

"Routed with great slaughter," says Kit to herself, with a malicious smile, and for the next half-hour plays pretty havoc with the flowers, unmolested.

But time drags with her, and is a grievance rather than a joy. What a long morning it has been!—and what an unclouded sky, all one tiresome blue! not so much as a wink in it. Good gracious, if Italy is always like that, how she would hate Italy!

Some people, no doubt, would like the exquisite monotony of it; but then some people would like anything. Shooting, for example! The idea of spending a whole day in a murderous assault upon defenceless little birds! How cruel, how senseless!—sport, indeed! Now, it isn't one bit that she misses anybody (with a vehement shake of her head), or is lonely, or wants any one back again, that has given rise to these withering comments, but, really and truly, only an honest surprise that people should care to pass hour after hour trudging through broken fields with so utterly paltry an object in view.

By the bye, when did Monica say the men would be home from their "slaughter of the innocents"? She wishes she could say when would "the man" be home? but that tiresome Mr. Mannering seems determined to stay on at Coole, though she is positive he can't shoot anything. In fact, Dicky Browne told her so. Strangely enough, in spite of her scornful reflections of a moment since, this doesn't seem to add any lustre to the mental picture she has drawn of Mr. Mannering.

"Why doesn't he go back to his beloved England?" she says, pettishly, apostrophizing a yellow rose. "I don't encourage him to neglect it as he is doing."

"Kit," calls Monica, thrusting her head out of the dining-room window, "come in to luncheon, do! the servants are tired of looking for you, and the cutlets are fast resolving themselves into leather."

Certainly—whether for that reason or for any other—the cutlets don't seem to do Kit much good. She is silent and *distraite* all through luncheon.

"You've been quarrelling with somebody," says Monica, glancing at her keenly, when she has seen her favorite cream go away untasted. Mrs. Desmond is not so long a wife that she has forgotten all about it.

"No, I haven't," says Kit, so curtly that Monica knows she has guessed aright, and is much discomposed by the knowledge. That there has been a skirmish of wits between Kit and some one unknown is as clear to her as the day; and that Kit is now angrily and half repentantly

going over and over that skirmish again, with her inner self as judge and jury to excuse her or condemn, is equally apparent. There is indignation in her pretty eyes, and a little—a very little—grief: evidently her inner self is being very lenient to her. Was it between her and Mr. Brabazon that that secret disturbance arose? Of this Monica, though with an unpleasantly strong suspicion of the truth upon her mind, cannot be quite sure. To feel a quarrel, one must either love or hate the one quarrelled with. That Kit does not hate Neil Brabazon is only too well known to her married sister, who would indeed fain have had it otherwise. If she should insist upon loving him, it would be a terrible pity, and one that ought to be prevented at all risks. Why should her pretty Kit be wedded to a hopelessly briefless barrister, when here was Mr. Mannering, with as many thousands a year as the other had hundreds, only waiting for a look, a word, from her to cast it all at her wilful feet? That Mr. Brabazon has openly declared to Kit his affection for her is known to Monica; what Kit's answer was is, however, unknown to her. That it was hardly as satisfactory as an ardent lover could desire she has guessed from certain signs and tokens. Evidently Kit had hesitated. Much might come of this hesitation. Procrastination is a thief: it might steal from Brabazon even those faint sweet friendly sentiments that Kit half coquettishly acknowledged she entertained for him. "There is always hope," says Monica to herself, even whilst gazing at her sister's downcast countenance.

The day closes in, and evening descends apace,—a warm and sultry evening, with not a suspicion about it of cold or damp. A breath from the departed summer has come to it:

> "The falling day
> Gilds every mountain with a ruddy ray;
> In gentle sighs the softly whispering breeze
> Salutes the flowers, and waves the trembling trees."

Monica, who has been haunting Kit all day with an evident desire to say something to her from which her heart revolts, now, plucking up courage, follows her into the orchard, where, as a rule, Miss Beresford is to be found all day long, guarding (?) the plums.

"Kit," she says, taking the plunge with a shiver, "I want to ask you about Mr. Brabazon."

"You used to call him Neil before his uncle married," says Kit, in a rather impossible tone.

"Used I? Well, never mind that. He has proposed to you, I know. Have you accepted him?"

"No," coldly,—perhaps a little defiantly.

"I think you have shown great good sense," says Mrs.

Desmond, with a sigh of relief, though conscious that the relief stands on a very frail foundation.

"I wonder if you would have said that a month ago, before Sir Michael got married," says Kit, with abominable persistence. "However," maliciously, "not accepting one man doesn't make one accept another."

"Certainly not; but——"

"I suppose I should have shown even greater good sense if I could have brought myself to accept Mr. Mannering?" says Kit, with a little scornful laugh.

"I think if you could do so——"

"Well, I couldn't," says Kit, decisively.

"Not now, perhaps, but——"

"Neither now, nor at any other time. I wouldn't," says Miss Beresford, slowly, "be as mercenary as you, Monica, for all I possess."

"That is so very little, darling," says Mrs. Desmond, with tears in her eyes. It is horrible to her to be called mercenary, but how can she let this girl she loves so dearly make herself uncomfortable for life! "So very little that I cannot bear to see you contemplating a marriage with a man who has literally nothing."

"I am not contemplating anything. I don't believe—so far as that goes—that I shall ever marry anybody, and certainly not a man who hasn't a feature in his face or an idea in his head. Why, just look at his nose!"

"I don't see anything wrong with Mr. Brabazon's nose," says Monica, determined to be just even to her foe, "and I believe he has as much brains as most young men."

"Mr. Brabazon!" cries Kit, flushing crimson. "Who is talking about him? And who has a nose except Mr. Mannering?"

Monica, discovering her error, and finding herself in the wrong, is very justly incensed.

"*I* have," she says, with great dignity. But Kit treats the dignity with contumely and contempt.

"The idea," she says, "of pretending you thought I was alluding to Neil. One of your jokes, I suppose; but a sorry one, let me tell you."

"You mentioned no name," says Monica.

"Well, I shall now. I was speaking of Mr. Mannering."

"I don't think any one but you would say he was totally devoid of brains."

"He isn't raving mad, if you mean that, or even, strictly speaking, an imbecile, but he is as near the latter as decency will permit."

"I think you should not speak so of a man whose only fault is——"

"'Loving me too well,'" quotes Kit, with an irrepressible if rather angry laugh.

"It isn't kind," persists Monica, gravely.

"And is it kind of you," demands Kit, vehemently, "to flout and sneer at the man I like ten times better than any other man I know, even though I am not sure that I quite love him? Ah! when you were worried about Brian, before your marriage, it wasn't in such a fashion as this *I* treated *you!*"

This is a terrible reproach. Mrs. Desmond's own love-affair, having been a very genuine one, had run anything but smoothly. There had been serious complications, and divers difficulties, in all of which she had been supported by Kit's unbounded sympathy. There had, too, been certain situations that had owed their triumphant terminations to Kit's assiduity. Monica's heart melts within her as all these memories rise.

"Oh, Kitty, I am not ungrateful or forgetful," she says, miserably; "and if you really think that——"

There is no knowing to what extent she might have committed herself but for the appearance of two young men, who, entering the orchard at this moment from the eastern side of the yew hedge, advance rapidly towards her, and so check the words that are lingering on her lips. One is Neil Brabazon, the other Dicky Browne.

"Ah! they have returned from their shooting," says Mrs. Desmond, quickly.

"So I can see," returns her sister, coldly.

Mr. Browne is all smiles. Mr. Brabazon is all the reverse. There is a sense of injury about him not to be mistaken. There is, too, a determination not to look at Miss Beresford that is perfectly clear to everybody except Miss Beresford herself, who, being equally bent upon ignoring him, loses sight of this fact.

Dicky, who is evidently full of mirth, advances towards his hostess with a beaming face. Utterly undecided at the close of the London season as to whether he was most in love with Mrs. Desmond, Kit, or Lady Clontarf (then Miss Costello), he had grasped the opportunity offered him by The Desmond (who is an old friend of his father) of coming over to Ireland to pursue the subject, or rather subjects, and decide upon who should be "the proud possessor of the priceless treasure of his love." This is how he put it.

"After all, Kit, I think it will be you," he had said to her only yesterday.

"I beg you won't hurry your decision," Miss Beresford had replied. "Be calm. Very little excitement would serve to eternally unhinge the thing you are pleased to call your mind."

"'My mind to me a kingdom is,'" retorted Mr. Browne, with dignity, whereupon Miss Beresford had given way to unseemly mirth.

"I don't think any one will try to dispossess you," she had said, with a faint grimace.

"After that, Katherine," said Mr. Browne, severely, "I don't think it *will* be you!"

"Here we are again,—like the clown," he says now, with the utmost geniality. "Don't be frightened, Mrs. Desmond: Brian, though not with us, is in very safe hands; no internal injury, I am happy to say; with a little care and good nursing, I should think in about six weeks' time——"

"Dicky! I wish you wouldn't jest on such horrid subjects," says Mrs. Desmond.

"Well, I won't, then. I'll adhere to the strict truth. We're all here,—every one of us,—not even an arm or a leg missing, though, to do Mannering strict justice, he did all he knew."

"Poor Mr. Mannering! what has he done now?" says Kit, with all the air of one taking the part of an absent lover.

"Nothing, fortunately," says Mr. Browne. "If he had so much as changed the position of his gun, we should have waked in the morning to find ourselves all dead men; but he brought it home as he started with it, on his left shoulder."

"Did you ever see such a fellow to shoot?" says Mr. Brabazon, with glad disgust. "I wonder why he goes in for it. In my opinion, even if he tried,—which he certainly wouldn't,—he couldn't hit a haystack flying."

"Could you?" asks Dicky Browne, with praiseworthy promptitude. "I have noticed that all the old remarks, and saws, and similes culled from our grandfathers are tinged with imbecility. I'm perfectly certain if I were to see a haystack sailing majestically through the air I should be so paralyzed by fear that I should miss with both barrels."

"Ah! but you are such a sensitive creature, you know, Dicky," says Miss Beresford, saucily.

"At all events," says Brabazon, with a faint yawn, "Mannering isn't in it at all. He can't shoot, he can't fish, he can't ride. He's rather a fool all round, I think. Don't you, Mrs. Desmond?"

This is embarrassing.

"No," says Monica, gently, but decidedly, "I do not. He is, I am sure, both a gentlemanly and an amiable young man." As she says this she is almost afraid to look at Kit.

"You needn't say another word," says Dicky, enthusi-

astically: "such praise is not to be surpassed. To be an 'amiable young man' one must be dull and ill-favored, but rich in the grander qualities,—good-natured to a fault, and a regular beggar to fetch and carry. I know all about it. I'm an amiable young man."

"I won't dispute the dulness or the ill favor," says Kit. "But I don't believe you would fetch and carry for any one."

"Wouldn't I? You just try," says Mr. Browne.

"Well, fetch me—Mr. Mannering."

Brabazon starts, and for an instant lets his eyes seek hers. As though unaware of the reproachful glance, Kit laughs gayly. "Ah! you hesitate," she says to Dicky Browne.

"Far be it from me," replies that youth, "but, to tell you the truth, I'm afraid he wouldn't like it. He is at present in the billiard-room, having some maraschino with Brian. You would not like to be disturbed if you were having your maraschino, would you?"

"It would entirely depend upon who disturbed me. I shouldn't mind it in the least if it happened to be you or —Mr. Mannering."

The second pause is even more cruel. Again Brabazon looks at her. He might perhaps have even said something, so wrathful is his glance, but that just at this moment Mannering himself, with Brian Desmond, comes round the corner and advances towards them.

"Ah! Mr. Mannering, we were just wondering where you were," says Kit, brightly. The brightness is all meant for the extermination of Brabazon (with whom she had had a most sanguinary quarrel early in the day), but Mr. Mannering accepts it gracefully as a tribute to his charms.

"At least we were saying something about you," says Monica, gently, though in her heart she feels coldly towards him, in that he has been so slow to join his "ladye love."

"Yes, we were all declaring how much we liked you," says Dicky Browne, with a sweet smile,—sweet enough, indeed, to suggest the existence of treachery beneath. But not to Mr. Mannering. He takes all the pretty speeches as his just due.

"Ah! that was very good of you all," he says, benignly. "More than I deserve, I fear."

He is a very English young man, heavy, solid, stolid, and generally unupsettable.

"Oh, don't say that!" entreats Dicky, with tearful entreaty; while Mr. Brabazon stands glaring at his rival with savage meditation in his eye.

"Do you know what Brabazon is doing?" asks Mr. Browne of Kit, in a confidential whisper. "I'll tell you. He's deciding about the best place to begin at when he gives Mannering that kicking he has in store for him."

"I hope, when he does give it, he will make it a sound one," returns she, with unlooked-for vivacity.

CHAPTER V.

"I may you not devise all her beauty,
But thus much of her beauty tell I may:
That she was like the bright morrow of May
Fulfilled of all beauty and pleasance."

"AND where have you been all day, you bad boy?" says Monica to her uncle, The Desmond, at whose right hand she always sits. He is only her uncle by marriage, but he is never a bit the less her uncle for all that. The soup has just been removed.

"Why, you forget it is court-day, my beauty," returns the old man, patting her little white hand softly. "There were one or two cases on, more than usually disgraceful."

"Were there? Tell them to us," says Monica.

"Agrarian?" asks Brian, from the foot of the table. As he says this, the footman, who is helping him to some sherry, twists his hand awkwardly, and spills some of the wine upon the cloth.

"How stupid of you!" says Brian, in a low tone, glancing up at him. "One would think you were nervous."

"Oh, yes,—agrarian, of course," says the Squire. "That fellow Casey was up for the murder of the bailiff O'Donnell. You remember?—man left lying on the roadside, with a bullet through his right lung, last May? Tim Casey was arrested for it yesterday. Like all the others, he swore persistently that he never handled a gun or a revolver, or any other sort of weapon in his life. It is sickening the way they perjure themselves. The police, however, brought forward a man, called Larry Regan, whose evidence, if proved reliable, will certainly hang Casey. He swore in turn that the night before the murder was committed, Casey came to him with a revolver under his coat, and asked him if it wasn't 'a nate tool,' and if it wouldn't do 'to settle O'Donnell.' 'An' I tould him, sir,' said the respectable Larry, 'that it would do fust-rate, but faix,' says I, 'I hope 'tis a good pepperin' ye mane for him, an' not murdher outright, for his death would be the ruin of the barony!'"

Everybody laughs except Mr. Mannering, who, being a stranger to Irish soil, doesn't understand its laws.

"How?—I don't quite see about the ruination of the barony. How does that come in?" he asks, anxiously. He is indeed one of those people who are always demanding information, yet never seem to know anything.

"Here in Ireland," says The Desmond, good-humoredly, "when an agrarian murder is committed, a tax of so much in the pound is levied upon the barony in which the crime takes place. This tax, added to the usual county rates, makes the whole amount rather rough on the farmers."

"Why has this Regan betrayed him?" asks Kit, suddenly. "I can't see his reason for it."

"Five hundred pounds is a very sound reason," says The Desmond, dryly: "so much was offered by government for the apprehension of the murderer."

"Ah! blood-money!" says Kit, with a shudder of disgust. "What thing is there on earth, I wonder, so vile as an informer?"

"At heart Kit is a rebel," says Brian, laughing. "Come, confess now, Kit, that you think Regan a far worse man than Casey."

"Indeed yes," says Kit, stoutly. "One killed his man, —iniquitously beyond doubt, but without hope of personal gain; the other seeks to kill his man for the sake of a paltry five hundred pounds."

"Well done, Kit!" says Dicky. "I agree with you. You are as sound as a bell."

"Our bell in the cathedral below is cracked," puts in Monica, mildly.

"All Irish conspiracies have fallen victims to the lust of gain that is ingrained in our lower classes," says Brabazon. "I wonder these so-called patriots of ours don't lose heart."

"Matters grow worse every day," says The Desmond. "You remember what that Kerry fellow said who was implicated in the death of poor Arthur Herbert. It happened at the last Cork assizes: I was there myself and heard him. He swore he was in Tralee at the time the crime was perpetrated,—a town"—to Mr. Mannering—"about nine miles or so from the scene of the murder; then, looking calmly round the court-house, he said, 'Why, there isn't a poorer-spirited county in Ireland than Kerry: if it wasn't for Castle Island, it would be disgraced intirely!' Now, Castle Island, besides Mr. Herbert's, has been the chosen spot for three or four other most atrocious murders. This little incident will give you some slight idea of the spirit of the people among whom we live."

"Very unpleasant indeed," says Mr. Mannering, shifting his glass uneasily from one eye to the other.

"I'll tell you what we'll do after dinner," says Monica, gayly, with a view to changing the conversation. "We'll all walk up to Kilmalooda and see Doris: she and her husband came yesterday, you know. It is a heavenly night, and the distance only about a mile or so."

"A capital thought," says The Desmond. "And I'll go with you. I want to see Clontarf to tell him about the scandalous poisoning of those hounds last week. It must be brought home to somebody."

"You have a cold, Uncle George; it will be too late for you to venture out,—won't it, now?" says Monica, with a sudden alteration of manner from extreme vivacity to a sort of suppressed anxiety.

"Oh, no, my dear, not at all," says the Squire, pleasantly.

For an instant Monica looks as though she would still argue the point, then she checks herself abruptly.

"Very well," she says. "Will you come too, Brian?" She leans forward as though to catch her husband's eye, but fails in her attempt, as his gaze is at this moment bent meditatively upon the footman who had been so awkward with the sherry a little time ago. He is a tall, cadaverous-looking young man, with deeply-sunken eyes that are now fixed with curious intentness upon The Desmond, as though their owner while digesting his last speech is careful not to miss his next. So lost in thought has he become that he is totally unconscious of Brian's scrutiny.

"He has not heard you, Monica," says Kit, alluding to Brian. "Throw something hard at him: he has evidently gone to sleep with his eyes open."

If so, he now awakens. Addressing the footman, he says, quietly,—

"When you have solved that problem to your entire satisfaction, Connor, we should again be glad of your services."

The man starts as if struck, and, going hurriedly to the sideboard, pretends to busy himself there, with such an over-excess of zeal as betrays agitation.

Leaving the room after dinner, Monica stops by her husband's chair, and whispers to him, in a low tone,—

"I think you should prevent him, if possible, from coming with us to-night," she says. "It is late, and——"

"I'll see to it," says Brian, hastily, looking up at her with a carefully careless smile. The Desmond, though the dearest old man in the world, is one who, at times, requires a good deal of managing.

Brian, however, is as good as his word. Just at the very last, when they are all ready to start on their moonlight expedition, he says some little thing to his uncle that has the desired effect of keeping him at home.

"Why wouldn't you let him come?" asks Dicky Browne, curiously, as they all go up the avenue together.

"Because he has had so many threatening letters of late; and he was fired at and severely wounded, you may remember, about eighteen months ago. He is what they call a marked man here, and is in worse odor than ever with the people now, on account of these late evictions."

"He is, too, very strict on the bench: he never lets any one off," says Monica, with a little sigh.

"He is quite right to do his duty, whatever comes of it," says Brian, sturdily, apologizing for thus daring to differ with her, by drawing her hand lovingly through his arm.

"I know that," says Monica, with a sigh even more profoundly miserable than the last. "I only mean—that is, I wish—there wasn't any duty to do."

"If any one repeats that immoral sentiment," says Mr. Browne, sternly, "I shall be under the painful necessity of depriving you of my society. I shall have to go home."

As they draw near to Kilmalooda, they can see that the drawing-rooms are all ablaze with light, and that the windows opening from them on to the balcony are thrown wide open.

"So nice to be able to do that," says Kit, enviously. "At Coole we are obliged to keep the shutters fastened, or we should have somebody blowing off The Desmond's head."

"Yes,—at dinner, for example," says Dicky. "Fancy The Desmond's feelings when he saw his own head in his soup-plate!"

Nobody takes any notice of this nasty speech, except Miss Beresford, who says, in a thoughtful tone, "It wouldn't fit."

"Wait until the March rents fall due, and Clontarf asks for his own: then we'll see how he'll manage about his windows," says Brian, with a little sniff.

"Let us race up to the balcony, and take whoever is in the drawing-room by surprise," says Kit, eagerly. This proposition meeting with approbation, they all with one consent make a rush for it, and, with some vague delightful sense of the old school-days about them, scamper noisily up the stone steps and present themselves in a body at the middle window.

Inside, Lady Clontarf is sitting alone, reading by the light of a softly-shaded lamp.

"Don't be afraid, mum," calls out the irrepressible Dicky, in a terrific voice. "Yer as safe as a baby with us; all we want is yer jools! We wouldn't hurt a hair o' yer purty head, for all ye could offer,—barrin' it wasn't goold!"

Lady Clontarf naturally starts, and then springs smiling to her feet.

"Ah, Monica, this is good of you," she says. "I had made up my mind to go down to you in the morning. Indeed, I should have gone this afternoon; but that I was expecting Vera. She has come."

"Your sister? How charming for you!" says Monica.

"You here, Dicky?" says Doris, turning to him, when she has greeted the others. "You *are* a surprise. Why, I thought you safe at The Court. What brought you to this benighted land?"

"Three trains, a boat, and a carriage," replies Mr. Browne, with all the promptitude that distinguishes him.

"I know that; but what inducement, I mean."

"I think it's awfully unkind of you to ask me such a question as that," says Dicky, with tearful reproach. "*You* are here, aren't you?"

"Yes; well, go on," unfeelingly.

"And Mrs. Desmond was good enough to ask me, and town was getting quite too beastly,—all smoke and smells, and nobodies. So"—airily—"I got up one morning, looked out of my back window, said 'Adieu, adieu, my native sewer' to the unpleasant drain beneath it, and after a bit found myself here."

"Very graphic," murmurs Mr. Mannering, who detests Dicky Browne.

"I wonder where Vera is," says Lady Clontarf, presently. "I want to show her to you; she left me only a moment since, to get——Ah!" with a glad, pleased smile, "here she is."

The door has opened, and now every one is looking towards it. On its threshold stands a little slight, childish figure, motionless. Seeing so many unexpected strangers, she has naturally come to a stand-still, but, without showing any signs of awkwardness or embarrassment, rather with the unconscious curiosity of a child, she gazes at them in a friendly fashion, and then walks straight up to her sister.

Doris in speaking of her had often told them she was seventeen, or perhaps nearer eighteen, but there is something so wonderfully youthful about Vera that when one looks her age is forgotten. One would never dream of saying "she must be this age or that," but only "how young she is!"

Her eyes are large, and blue,—a very distinct blue, without the slightest tinge of violet. Her head is covered with little short curls of "hair, sheen as gold," that tumble in a careless fashion over her low white forehead.

"Her mouth is short, and shut in little space,
Flaming some deal, not over red I mean."

And there is a charming touch of innocence in her soft smile.

She is dressed in a little white frock rather short-waisted and with no sleeves; there are high puffs on her shoulders, and a big terra-cotta sash of Indian silk is tied round her waist. She is as pretty as an angel, and looks half a baby, half a woman. As she reaches Doris she slips her hand confidingly into hers.

"This is Vera," says Lady Clontarf to Monica; and—"this is Mrs. Desmond, dearest," to the girl. Then every one is made known to her, and she smiles with equal friendliness on all.

On entering the room, she had been followed by Lord Clontarf, and a tall dark young man of about twenty-six, with a very earnest face. This latter is addressed as "Gerald" by all in the room except Mannering, who calls him "Mr. Burke."

Every one is in the gayest spirits: Monica is laughing merrily with Lord Clontarf; Kit is saying something in her bright vivacious way to the little fair beauty who is listening to her, with her eyes now on Mr. Burke, now on Dicky Browne, now on Neil Brabazon.

"Who is Mr. Browne?" she says, at last, looking into Kit's eyes with the frankest curiosity in her own.

"Dicky? I—really, except that he is Dicky Browne, I don't know," says Kit, rather puzzled. "He has a home somewhere in England, but he never stays there."

"He looks as if he hadn't a mother," says Vera, quaintly.

"Well, he hasn't, either," says Kit, "nor a brother nor a sister, only a father."

"He doesn't look as if he had any profession either, does he?" says Vera, smiling sweetly.

"No. He idles generally. He will have some money, and the place, and that, when his father dies, but it isn't much, I think," says Kit, regretfully. "Still, it will be enough for Dicky."

"And it doesn't matter a bit about being poor, if one is nice, does it?" says Vera, with a little gay laugh that is one of the youngest things about her.

"No, indeed," says Kit, with much fervor, and an unconscious glance at Brabazon.

"Mr. Brabazon is very handsome, I think," says Vera, leaning forward to press her lips to a sprig of heliotrope on Kit's shoulder.

"Is he?" says Kit, indifferently.

"*You* ought to think so," with an innocent glance, "oughtn't you?"

"Why?"

"Because he thinks *you* so handsome: that's a very good

'why,' isn't it?" The little questions at the end of each speech are becoming so constant that now Kit absolutely looks for them. There is a monotony about them that is ridiculously attractive.

"I don't suppose he does think that," she says, amused in spite of herself.

"Oh, yes, he does. One can see," says Vera, and again the soft rippling laugh makes itself heard.

Something else, too, at this moment makes itself heard, —something that strikes every soul in the room dumb. They all turn and look at each other in a sort of terrified doubt. Then comes the sound again,—the sound of a harsh feminine voice,—and the doubt resolves itself into a painful certainty.

"It is!" murmurs Clontarf, in a ghastly whisper.

"My aunt!" continues Doris, faintly.

"Let us run for it!" exclaims Dicky Browne, energetically, fired with a noble desire for the public good,—to say nothing of his own private weal, Mrs. Costello being the one woman in the world who regards him with a settled loathing only second to that she entertains for the Marquis of Dundeady.

No sooner said than done! The words have scarcely passed Mr. Browne's lips, before they are unanimously acted upon. Pell-mell they rush for the windows, and never cease their flight until the house, and the jarring discord of Mrs. Costello's voice, are left far behind.

Presently they come to anchor in a little soft shady nook of a place, all over which the moonbeams are running riot. Some beds of flowers are cut in the closely-shaven turf; tall shrubs of many sorts enclose it round. Here and there are dotted garden-seats.

"Now we are safe," says Lady Clontarf, sinking breathless into one of them, with a sigh of relief.

"I'm cold," says Vera, suddenly.

"I'll get you a shawl," says Mr. Burke, directly she says it, and is gone before she can even tell him where to find one.

"You've been abroad so long, I suppose you feel the climate here rather miserable," says Dicky Browne, who can't take his eyes off her. Now, at last, he tells himself, he has found his fate! His doom is sealed! He is henceforth love's slave! He has said all this to himself about fifty times before, but that makes no difference. His nature is of the fond and trusting order.

"I don't know: this was a charming day, wasn't it?—such a warm sun, and such a dear little chill?" says Vera. "The flowers last longer here than I should have thought likely."

"You are fond of flowers? You ought to be," says Dicky, rapturously. "You are a perfect one yourself. You look as if you were only born to live among them."

Vera opens her large eyes.

"It would be a little slow, don't you think?" she says, with a placid smile.

"Listen to Dicky! he is going fearfully mad," says Brian Desmond, at this moment. "He is growing poetical: he is making the most thrilling remarks about flowers. Positively, his hair is beginning to stand on end."

"*Hers* will, if he isn't soon removed," says Mr. Brabazon, prophetically.

"Well, so it would," says Dicky to Vera, totally unabashed by her last speech. "Awful rubbish, I think, you know, going in for solitude, and sentiment of that sort. Give me the world. How did you like being in Switzerland, by the bye?"

"I wasn't there all the time," says Vera. "I made some friends at Berne, who took me to Paris with them a good deal. I," with a tranquil glance at Dicky, "liked that."

"You would, you know," says Mr. Browne, appreciatively.

"Then Doris wrote to me of her marriage, and said I was to come to her. I liked the thought of that, too,—when I was there. The journey was very long. Mr. Burke met me in London and brought me the rest of the way. He was very kind."

Here Mr. Burke appearing with the shawl, she turns her beautiful little face up to his with a tender smile.

"I am telling Mr. Browne how good you were to me all the way from London here," she says, with a flush of childish gratitude.

Gerald Burke's hands tremble slightly as he wraps the soft white shawl round her slender shoulders.

"That journey will always seem to me like a happy dream," he says, in a clear, pleasant voice, but with an earnestness underlying the carelessness not to be mistaken.

"Dreams are charming because they are so idle," says Vera, with an airy laugh.

Monica and Lady Clontarf have strolled away together to a little distance; somebody has gone to tell one of the servants where their coffee will find them; Clontarf is talking in a desultory fashion to Brian Desmond.

"It was such a deuce of a bore having to be away all last month," he is saying, "and I hear the shooting was exceptionally good. However, a honeymoon is a sort of thing that must be done, I suppose."

"Different fellows think differently, of course," says

Brian, knocking the ash off his cigar, and trying not to look surprised. "I confess," laughing, "I was rather sorry when my wedding-trip came to an end."

"Well, catch me doing another!" says Clontarf, with a shrug.

"My dear fellow, I hope you won't have the chance," returns Desmond, lightly. Seeing Lady Clontarf and Monica drawing near again, he changes the subject. Kit and Mr. Brabazon have withdrawn to a considerable distance, which perhaps accounts for Mr. Mannering's dark mood; Dicky Browne, as usual, is in the gayest spirits.

"Try a cigarette, Miss Costello," he is saying just now to Vera, holding out to her a very pretty case made of Panama grass. Doris laughs.

"You mustn't mind Mr. Browne, darling," she says, caressingly.

"I don't," says Vera, sweetly. Then she glances plaintively at the already stricken Dicky. "As you offer it to me, I think I should like to try one," she says, nodding at the cigarette-case.

"Oh, no, dearest," says Doris, hurriedly. "It will make you feel so ill."

"Will it? Let me try," says the little beauty, with a capricious persistency that somehow suits her. She turns to Dicky and with her slender white fingers draws a cigarette from his case.

"Will you light it for me?" she says to Mr. Burke, and, having placed the cigarette between her rosy lips, turns her face up to his. Silently he obeys. Removing his cigar from his mouth, he applies it to her cigarette, and watches her, as she contentedly inhales the fragrant smoke and sends it forth again in little curling rings. His face, as he does so, is a study, it is so entirely expressive of amazement. Not that a woman should smoke; he has known many a good and pretty woman who took mild delight in that masculine enjoyment: his surprise arises from the fact that Vera looks so awfully unlike that sort of thing.

"Throw it away soon," says Dicky Browne, anxiously. "Do, now: you won't like it, I'm sure."

"No?" says Vera, simply: with her first and second fingers she removes the cigarette to ask this question.

"No, you won't, I'll be bound," says Dicky. "My first cigar brought me to the point of death: I'll never forget it."

"Happy cigar," says Brian.

"The first of anything is always a mistake, isn't it?" says Vera, replacing the cigarette between her pearly teeth.

"They're very mild, certainly," goes on Dicky, still absorbed with the fearful thought that Vera's childish determination to get through a cigarette—just because he

offered it to her, dear little thing—will cause her unpleasantness: "a little of one can't do you much harm, I think," he says. "But do throw it away now. I should never forgive myself if it gave you a headache."

"Still, as I have begun, perhaps I may as well finish it," says Vera, prettily, lifting her large blue baby eyes to his for an instant.

"Well," says Dicky, hopefully, seeing she still holds on, and shows no deadly symptoms, "perhaps it won't hurt you: it is an excellent brand, at all events."

Vera shakes her head; and as she does so all her pretty silken curls shake too.

"I think I have smoked better!" she says, with a little confidential nod.

Tableau! Every one stares a little, and Lady Clontarf grows rather pink.

"Did Madame allow you to smoke?" she asks, just a little severely.

"No; oh, no! But whenever I went to Paris, with my friend the Comtesse de Polignac, we, she and I, used to smoke a little, to—to keep away the flies, she said. Dear Paris!" She smiles involuntarily, as at some happy recollection, and, turning again to Mr. Browne, puts out her hand and runs her fingers caressingly over the case he is still holding.

"What a sweet little affair," she says, absently.

"Do you like it? Will you have it? Please do," says Dicky, eagerly.

"Oh, may I? Really? You are sure? Oh, thank you," she says, rapturously. She actually laughs with pleasure at the gift.

Hearing her, Clontarf laughs too.

"You will spoil your pretty teeth, Vera, if you smoke too much," he says.

"Yes? I should hate that," says Vera. She glances at him thoughtfully. "You haven't spoiled yours," she says: "they are quite white."

"I give in," says Clontarf, laughing again, and shrugging his shoulders.

Kit and Brabazon having reappeared before this, Mr. Mannering now sees fit to come from behind his cloud.

"What a romantic little spot this is," he says, with his very best manner, glancing sentimentally at Kit,—"with its moon, and the distant glimpse of the sleeping sea down there in the hollow, and—and everything!"

This, it must be confessed, is a lame ending to what was meant to be a good beginning. Plainly, every one thinks so, as dead silence follows his remark,—broken, however, by Dicky Browne.

"Sort of place where a murder would be committed, I shouldn't wonder," he says, with the utmost cheerfulness.

"Oh, Dicky, don't!" says Monica, edging a degree closer to her husband. "It's horrid of you! Nobody, I am sure," glancing nervously over her shoulder, "wants to shoot any of *us*. There is no danger to-night, is there, Brian?"

"Not more than at any other time," says Brian. "One never knows when a bullet may find its home nowadays."

"What a charming country this is!" says Mr. Browne, with enthusiasm.

"Well, I really think it is, you know," says Brabazon,—"the most charming country in the world, in many ways." He makes this questionable assertion, not with a hypocritical desire to please Kit, who is an advanced patriot, but from a settled conviction that it must be so because she belongs to it.

"It's not bad," says Mr. Mannering, drawlingly. This kindly concession is received by Miss Beresford in extremely bad part.

"Ah! there you are wrong," she says, purposely misunderstanding him, with a view to his future confusion. "It is about as bad as it can be. If you don't call a country bad that is literally swarming with murderers, I can't think, I'm sure, what you *would* call it. But you needn't be satirical about it!"

"Eh?" says Mannering. He is not a quick young man, and, though sincerely and indeed miserably in love with Kit, there are moments when she surprises him to the verge of terror. "I assure you," he says, anxiously, "I meant nothing,—nothing at all."

"I know," returns Kit, nodding her head pleasantly: "you never do! I wronged you."

"It's eleven o'clock," says Brian, suddenly. "I'm going home. Any one coming with me?"

They all rise.

"We'll see you as far as the gate," says Doris. "It seems a pity to go in this lovely night. I suppose," with a sigh, "it is our last memory of summer."

"There will be other summers," puts in Neil Brabazon, quickly.

"But never this one again," says Doris.

"No! There is comfort in that thought, certainly," exclaims Clontarf, with a curious laugh. Every one grows a little silent, until Dicky Browne, rushing in with one of his sweeping remarks, sets the conversational ball rolling again.

Brian Desmond, who has not yet lost the lover's trick of always finding himself by the side of the beloved object

when walking in the company where she is, turns now to Monica.

"I think you are altogether wrong about Kit and Brabazon," he says. "See," pointing to where Kit is moving on before them with Mr. Mannering, "she wouldn't walk here with Neil, and now she's going back without him. That don't look like it."

"It only shows how little you know about it," says his wife, mournfully.

"But if she won't even speak to him!"

Plainly Brian had been blind to that little promenade in the moonlight half an hour ago.

"There were times when I wouldn't speak to you," says Mrs. Desmond, with a forcible glance from her azure eyes. "But did that prove I didn't love you?"

"That's a poser, certainly," says Brian. "Well, he's twice the man that Mannering is, at all events."

"If he were a Hercules," says Mrs. Desmond, with deep melancholy, "it wouldn't improve matters, unless he had a decent income."

"That's true; that's true," says Brian, indifferently, seeing a discussion imminent; and, feeling that in this instance at least discretion will be the better part of valor, he abstains from further argument; besides, by this time they have reached the outer gates, and everybody is saying good-by to everybody else.

"You will come down to-morrow?" says Monica, holding Lady Clontarf's hand.

"Yes. Though I was going to see the Misses Blake in the afternoon."

"Well, why shouldn't we all go there together?" says Monica. And so it is arranged.

Then the Desmonds and their party bid a last farewell, and go up the silent road, their footsteps sounding ghostly in the calm, unearthly stillness of the night. So quiet is the air that a sense of solemnity seems floating on it. "A lone owl's hoot, the waterfall's faint drip," in the distance, serve only to heighten the effect of its tranquillity.

A mystic light is lying on all around; a yellow tinge from the high heavens is gilding the fir-tops, and whitening every stone.

> "Lo! the beauteous moon,
> Like a fair shepherdess, now comes abroad,
> With her full flock of stars, that roam around
> The azure mead of heaven."

It is such a night as should create a glorious ecstasy in the minds of painters and of bards.

I am afraid there is little of the artistic element in the materials on which I have to work. There had been (I re-

gret to say) something resembling a smart scuffle between Brabazon and Mr. Mannering, a moment since, at the gates of Kilmalooda. It arose from an unexpressed but perfectly understood desire on the part of both to be Miss Beresford's sole escort back to Coole.

Whether this unworthy struggle would have ended in bloodshed, there is no means of knowing,—though the probability of it might well hold ground,—because just at the critical moment Miss Beresford herself had come forward, and, in an apparently unconscious fashion, had settled the question by placing her hand (apparently by the merest chance) upon Mr. Brabazon's arm. At this Mr. Mannering had proudly withdrawn from the contest, and in fact the little skirmish was all over before any one (but Kit) was cognizant of it. Her hand once on Brabazon's arm, she had left it there. Whatever had been said during that short moonlight stroll among the Kilmalooda shrubberies, certain it is that the quarrel of the morning, between Kit and Neil, is now as though it had never been.

There is a cleverness that is inspired, and that belongs alone to lovers. It now enables Mr. Brabazon so to contrive that presently he and Kit find themselves walking behind the others. Eyes mean death to those who love. It is therefore with the most thankful uplifting of their hearts that they presently discover no one can possibly see them without an uncomfortable craning of the neck-muscles.

Those in front, incited thereto by Mr. Browne, are talking gayly. Our two friends in the rear, up to this, have been singularly silent. But silence, however eloquent, can't last forever.

"Kit," says Neil Brabazon, in as low a tone as he can manage, "you don't like that fellow, do you?"

"That fellow" is indicated by a scornful flourish of the hand in the direction of Mr. Mannering, who is trudging on in front, with head erect and shoulders doggedly squared, and indeed a general air about him as of one breathing war. An inward conviction that he will presently have to slay either that contemptible hound Brabazon or that infernal ass Dicky Browne (so he styles these two estimable young men) is lending quite a martial expression to his usually flaccid face.

"No," says Kit. Perhaps he had expected a somewhat warmer disavowal, because his countenance falls.

"I suppose," he says, gloomily, "if he were in my place now, and were to ask you that question about me, your answer would be just the same."

"No," says Kit again, turning away her head, "it wouldn't."

"And yet, when I asked you in town, last month, to—to—wait for me, to—give me a chance—you——"

"That is a very long time ago," says Kit, in a low voice.

"Oh, Kit, what do you mean by that?" asks he; and, forgetting everything and everybody in his agitation, he stops short in the middle of the road and tries to read her averted face. "You wouldn't deceive me, would you? It is horribly selfish of me, I know, to try to induce you to give up a—a—rich marriage,—such as *he* could offer you,"—pointing again in the direction of "that fellow." "But"—desperately—"I don't care. I love you so much that it makes me selfish. I have heard and read a lot about renunciation, and fellows giving up for duty's sake the women they loved; but I am not like them: I can't give you up while there is the smallest chance for me,—while——"

"Are we to stand in the middle of the road all night?" asks Miss Beresford, suddenly.

"No, only until you answer me." He is holding her hands, and she persuades herself that even if she would she could not escape. She is so silent, however, that his courage dies from him.

"After all, I have no right to keep you here," he says, sadly, letting her go. "I bore you, perhaps. That is why you remind me we should follow the others. That night—how far away it seems now!—when you refused to give me any direct hope, I should have brought myself to understand what it was you really meant. It was the beginning of my end, was it not? I should have looked upon you then as one dead to me forever. If I had——"

"If you had," interrupts she, tremulously, "you would have broken my heart."

"Oh, darling," says Brabazon, in a tone that trembles even more than her own, "do you mean that? Are you sure?" There is a long pause, and then, "After all, Kit," he says, with a sudden great access of honest hope, "I suppose I shan't be always poor. I shall get on, you know. I shall make something in a few years. But"—with as sudden a descent into despair again—"I shall never be a rich man now my uncle has married. Does that frighten you? tell me truly, Kit."

"There is only one thing could frighten me," says Kit, "and that is the thought of ever marrying any man but you."

This charming speech certainly deserves an acknowledgment. The backs of Kit's pretty hands are considerably warmer by the time it is made.

"Then you will consent to wait for me for a year?" says Neil; "and though you may be (compared with other

people) poor all your life, still you will have a heart that will love you for ever and ever."

"That will be better than all the money in the world," says the girl, so earnestly, and with such girlish trust in her large eyes, that even before he is aware of it himself his arms are round her.

"You will be true to me, I feel it," he whispers, rapturously. Then he lifts his head and anxiously regards the party on in front. "They—they have just turned the corner," he says, thankfully. "I think"—diffidently—"you might kiss me *once*" (great stress on the "once") "before we rejoin them."

Kit hesitates, bites her lip, and laughs,—a low, faint laugh, not without embarrassment, yet not altogether without amusement too. Finally, blushing generously, she raises her face to his, and kisses him with all her heart.

"Now you are mine forever," says the young man, solemnly.

"I am very glad of that," whispers she back to him, with a grave sweet smile.

"There is something about you, Kit, different from any other girl I have ever met," says Neil, tenderly. "I have heard of men who were jealous of their sweethearts, and who, when away from them, were uncertain of their faith. But I should never feel a doubt of you. I can't explain why,—it is something in your eyes, I think,—but I know I never should. Now you have given yourself to me, I know you will be true to me. This morning I was—oh, how miserable I was! now all my anxiety and torture are at an end, and only an unutterable sense of happiness remains."

Lifting his hat, he looks up gratefully to the exquisite starlit sky above him. "I don't suppose," he says, slowly, "that I shall ever be able to tell you how happy I am."

"Oh, Neil," cries Kit, impulsively, turning to him a beautiful face bright with emotion, "that is just how I feel about—you!"

Was there ever so sweet a creature as she looks now, with her lovely face upturned, and her soft eyes filled with tears? Brabazon gazes at her as though he could never tire of so fair a spectacle, and indeed, in all human probability, they might be now so standing, in an ecstasy too deep for words, beneath the rays of the mystic moon locked hand in hand—but for an unlooked-for interruption!

CHAPTER VI.

"There as by áventure this Palamon
Was in a bush, that no man might him see,
For so afearéd of his death was he."

It is a rustle in the bushes near them! All along the right-hand side of the road, on the top of the high bank that skirts it, clumps of furze and hawthorn are growing, at unequal distances. Being thick in parts, they form a capital ambush for eavesdroppers,—or for worse.

Kit and Neil, starting guiltily as they hear the stealthy sound, turn involuntarily in the direction from which it has seemed to come. But again all is silence; only the ripple of distant streamlets, and the low murmuring laughter of those gone on before, are wafted to them on the drowsy breeze.

"It was fancy," says Neil, at last.

"I think not," says Kit, nervously: "it sounded like something human. Ah! Look there!"

She throws out her arm with a little frantic gesture towards one part of the wild hedge, thicker than the rest. As Brabazon hurriedly follows her gaze, he distinctly sees the figure of a man move from behind a furze-bush. There is something in his hand that also attracts his attention. It is the gleaming barrel of a revolver! Caught by the moon's rays, it shines out clear and distinct for a moment, and then is gone. The man springing down from his point of vantage into the field behind him, the revolver disappears with him.

With a muttered exclamation Neil bounds on to the bank, and looks hurriedly right and left. He strains his eyes eagerly up and down the deep dike that lies at the other side of this bank,—a dike deep and dark enough to conceal a small regiment,—but his sight avails him nothing. There is not so much as a shadow in the field beyond, while the dike itself is wrapped in densest gloom.

He is just about to jump down into the field to prosecute his search more closely, when a little imploring cry from Kit detains him.

"Oh, do not leave me here alone!" she exclaims, piteously. "The others have gone ever so far away, and I am afraid to stay on the road by myself. Oh, do come back to me!" This anxiety is a good deal for herself, but a great deal more for him. She grows cold with fright as she pic-

tures that terribly suspicious figure, of a moment since, presenting his revolver at Neil from some dark corner.

"What is to be done?" exclaims Neil, distracted between his anxiety for her and his fear of letting the man escape. There is no help for it, however: he certainly cannot desert her. Scrambling down to her side once more, he catches her hand.

"Now, run your best, Kit," he says; and presently, breathless and excited, they come up with the others, and relate what they have just seen.

"Ha! a bullet meant for the Squire, no doubt," says Brian, vehemently. "They made sure of getting him to-night!"

"It was there, in that field, we saw him," goes on Brabazon, pointing in its direction. "He can't be gone very far yet; he would be afraid to cross the open field in this strong moonlight: why not try for him again?"

"Yes, why not?" says Dicky Browne, eagerly, taking a step forward.

"No," says Brian, shortly; "you and Mannering must stay here to look after the girls, whilst Brabazon and I try our luck with our friend of the revolver." So saying, he springs on to the bank, followed by Neil; and both, jumping into the field, are swallowed up by the dark shadow of the ditch beside which they run.

Kit, pale and frightened, but calm and self-possessed, stands staring after them, trying to pierce the secrets of the night. Monica, who is trembling excessively, going up to her, clings to her tearfully.

"Oh, if anything should happen to him!" she says, thinking of her husband.

"If anything does, I shall never be happy again," says Kit, thinking of her Neil. There is, however, a certain joy in the thought that *he* is beyond fear,—he,—her hero, her Sir Launcelot, her knight, her—lover. It is a pity, no doubt, but, in spite of all the mediæval legends she has been studying and adoring for years, she now finds this last appellation dearer to her than all the rest. "I think the other two might have gone," she says, petulantly, "and left them with us." Alas for Mr. Mannering! Even as she says this she casts upon him a revengeful glance.

Dicky has proved scandalously untrue to his post. Unable to refrain from the pleasures of the chase, he has disappeared over the bank long ago, and is now in full cry. All to no purpose, however.

Returning after an exhausting but fruitless search, with Brian and Mr. Brabazon (both in whole skins and the lowest spirits), they confess their trouble vain.

"Not a sign of any one," says Neil. "It is the most extraordinary thing I ever knew. You saw him too, didn't you?" appealing anxiously to Kit as a witness that he has not been leading the others on a wild-goose chase.

"Distinctly," says Kit; "and his revolver. The moon shone full upon the barrel. I could not be mistaken."

"Well, come home now, at all events," says Desmond, discontentedly. He would have liked to spend the night searching for the culprit, but "the girls," as he always calls Kit and his wife, must be got back to Coole in safety.

"Do you think," says Mr. Mannering, cautiously, "that—er—it is quite safe for—for Mrs. Desmond and Miss Beresford to walk along the main road thus unprotected—eh?"

"Unprotected! Why, we are all here," says Neil, a little sharply.

"Of course, of course," haughtily, "but without weapons, as you may perceive. A bullet is a rather unanswerable argument at all times; and just now—Why, it might strike any of us," with increasing earnestness. "Is it safe, I ask, therefore, again?"

"Safe?" says Mr. Browne, striking in here hastily in a tone of the most abject terror. "How can you talk so presumptuously of safety, Mannering, when you must know you are in the very jaws of death? Every one of those bushes on your side (I notice particularly they are thicker and more conducive to concealment on your side) may harbor Brabazon's 'man with the revolver:' you're as good as walking on your own grave this moment. It is a solemn thought; this is indeed 'a most distressful counthry.' Oh, ''Appy 'Ampton,' 'ow I wish I could see you now! Don't you, Mannering?" This last in a perfectly different tone, replete with gayety.

"It is really a very lawless land," says Mr. Mannering, in a weak voice, that very little more of Dicky Browne would reduce to a tremble.

"'Ireland for the Irish!'" goes on Dicky, cheerfully. "That is Parnell's cry; why dispute it? Who wants it? They're welcome to it, say I: eh, Mannering?"

He has edged round, until he is now walking quite close to the latter, who, be it said, by no means covets his society. There is a little silence, only broken by the tramp of their feet upon the quiet road, and then——

"Oh! Ah! oh! what is that?" shrieks Mr. Browne, in a tone of agony, pointing in a frenzied fashion to a tall furze-bush that almost touches Mr. Mannering's elbow.

"What—where? *where?*" cries the latter, wildly (whose nerves by this time are utterly unstrung), beating about him in a very mad way with his walking-stick. Then, as

he awakens from his paralyzed dream, "Confound you!" he says to Dicky Browne, with bitter wrath, seeing that young gentleman is speechless with laughter at the success of his little ruse. The others, too, are politely endeavoring to smother their mirth, so that altogether Mr. Mannering feels very justly incensed.

But Monica (who is really frightened) has begun to cry, so Dicky Browne is peremptorily told to desist from further practical jokes, and to (generally speaking) shut up,—which he does with excessive meekness, expressing his contrition openly, and consenting to forgive himself only when Monica slips her disengaged hand through his arm and (having conquered her tears) smiles upon him. Thus peace is restored.

"Whoever you saw, Brabazon," says Brian, "meant his bullets for my uncle. Seeing he wasn't among the first lot of us who turned the corner, he naturally supposed (having been privately assured beforehand, I conclude, that the Squire was to go with us to-night to Kilmalooda) that you must be he, and only discovered his mistake almost as the revolver was levelled at you. Lucky for you he discovered it in time."

Kit shudders, and with a most natural sense of self-satisfaction lays her hand secretly on Brabazon's sleeve. It is quickly covered,—the hand, I mean. Yes, he is here, alive, and well, and—her own!

"But who could have told any one of our intention to visit Kilmalooda to-night?" says Monica. "It was quite a sudden determination on our part."

"'The worst foes of a man are those of his own household,'" quotes Brian, sententiously.

"But whom could you suspect, dearest?" says Monica.

"Dicky!" says Desmond, promptly: "he has all the appearance of being an arch-conspirator. I'm certain if he went to Dublin now, while these state arrests are going on, the detectives would arrest him at once as 'a suspicious-looking character.'"

"I wonder how people manage to look suspicious," says Dicky. "Do they squint at street-corners, or stand on their heads, or how?"

"That's it. They '*how*,'" says Mr. Desmond, with conviction.

Here they turn in the avenue gate, and are soon standing in the hall of Coole.

"Where is the Master?" asks Desmond, as a man comes forward to help him off with his coat.

"In the library, sir. He said he would sit up until you returned."

"Not a word of this affair to him," says Brian quickly

to the others. "It would only incense him, and do no good. But come and see him. He has been lonely without us, no doubt. And a glass of champagne, darling," in a low tone to his wife, "will do you and Kit good before going to bed."

Then he turns again to the man in attendance.

"I wonder where Connor put my cigar-case," he says, carelessly: "I couldn't find it when I was going out. Send him to me."

"Yes, sir; when he comes in, sir."

"Comes in? What does he mean by being out of the house at half-past twelve?"

"He said, after dinner, sir, as how his mother was took very bad with a stitch in her side, an' he went up to Ardrish Farm to see her."

"Ah!" says Brian, lifting his brows; "then I suppose he means to sleep at his mother's. No doubt she will require his services during the night. Lock all the doors, Byrne, and go to bed. Something tells me Connor will not come home until morning."

"Very well, sir," says the sleepy Byrne.

They all go into the library to relate to The Desmond any news of the Clontarfs that may chance to interest him. He is wide awake, but evidently tired, and very glad to see them home in safety.

"Times are so bad," he says, rising, and shaking himself like an old lion, "that really I began to conjecture all sorts of misfortunes as I saw the time slipping into the 'wee short hour ayont the twal.'"

"You conjectured wrongly, you see," says Brian, gayly.

"Monica looks pale," says the old man, tenderly. "See, I had a fire made expressly for you. Come near to it, my beauty, and let me chafe your hands."

Monica, going up to him, kisses him fondly with tears in her eyes.

They are all now laughing and talking together so light-heartedly, that the fact of Kit's not being in the room goes for a while unnoticed,—by all, that is, except Mr. Mannering, who, keeping apart from the others, stands glowering at the door. He is a man of many thousands, and cannot bring himself yet to believe that he is to be thrown over by a mere little chit of a girl for the sake of a man utterly worthless. Some words bear several meanings. Worthless men, in Mr. Mannering's dictionary, mean men without money; and of such is Neil Brabazon. That a girl should dream of disposing of herself contrary to the wishes of her best friends—in fact, of those who had, or at least ought to have, control over her—would be a thing unheard of in any well-regulated family. In time, of course, Kit will

learn to listen to reason and—him. His absurd and groundless jealousy of Brabazon is a mere passing weakness that must be checked. Thus proses the worthy Mannering.

But, in the mean time, where is she? This question exercises the good man's brain to a considerable extent. He declines to believe she is still in the hall with Neil Brabazon, though that young man is also conspicuous by his absence. "Doubtless," says Mr. Mannering to himself, with an attempt at complacency that sits but uneasily upon him, "she has gone up-stairs to take off her hat."

But she hasn't. Just at this moment she is standing in the empty hall, with Brabazon's arm around her. Something had lain heavily upon her mind all the way home, that she feels now must be got off it before she goes to bed, or sleep will refuse to visit her eyelids. She had cast a pathetic little glance at her lover, as they all went towards the library, a while since, that had made him execute several deep manœuvres, the result of which may be seen in the fact that they two are standing out here now, together, and—alone!

"What is it, darling?" he asks, anxiously.

"Oh, I can't get it out of my mind," says Kit: "the thought of it frightens me even more than the revolver."

"But what, my own?" asks Neil, growing really concerned.

"Don't you know? Can't you guess?" reproachfully. "I don't believe I shall ever get over the shame of it."

"On earth, what has happened?" asks Mr. Brabazon, fairly distraught with anxiety.

"That man! He must have—have seen us!"

"Seen what? What man?"

"I think, Neil," says Miss Beresford, with eyes full of glistening tears, "you might *show* a little sympathy, even if you can't *feel* it."

"My darling girl, I am going out of my senses with sympathy, only I don't know where to bestow it," exclaims the unfortunate Neil, in despair. "Try to explain it to me. If I'm stupid it isn't my fault, indeed. What man?—saw what?"

"The revolver man: he was standing on the bank all that time! He must"—covering her face with her hands—"have seen us kissing each other! And he will be sure to tell people of it! And—oh, dear! oh, dear!"

"He won't; he daren't," says Neil, who, having recovered from his suspense, is now struggling with a wild and (if it comes off) a most fatal desire for laughter. "And, even if he does speak of it, what matter? People know us

too well to believe such a vile scandal of us. Like Cæsar's wife, we are above suspicion."

"I'm afraid people might believe it," says Kit, timidly.

"Well, let them. What harm is there in a kiss?" says Mr. Brabazon, valiantly.

"Why, indeed, none, if one comes to think of it," says Kit, growing bolder too, though she still looks uncertain. "It is a thing done every day."

"I hope you'll remember that to-morrow," says Neil, laughing softly. "I think it should be done every evening too. Don't you?"

She evidently does.

"And promise me," whispers Neil, tenderly, "that you won't worry your dear little head—it is mine now, remember, and I won't have it worried—about such an absurd trifle as that, any more. You will forget it?"

"I'll try to," says Kit, obediently.

"There is, however," as Cockton says, "some mysterious virtue in a kiss, after all;" because through the livelong night Kit's gentle dreams are haunted by the memory of her lover's first caress.

CHAPTER VII.

"And well I wot, as ye go by the way,
Ye shapen you to talken and to play."

"ANOTHER day is added to the mass of buried ages;" another morning dawns; a most fair and sweet "morrowing,"—true child of sunny yesterday.

Again a sultry sweetness as of summer fills the air; again the sun comes forth in all his glory. The roses bloom afresh, and that "Epicurean of June," the drowsy bee, forgetting the month of its birth, floats thoughtlessly as ever through the balmy air,—

"Seeing only what is fair,
Sipping only what is sweet,
Yellow-breech'd philosopher!"

About two o'clock all the people from Kilmalooda drop into Coole and luncheon, and, when that genial meal is at an end, rise and sally forth again, their forces strengthened by the addition of the members of the household wherein they find themselves, to visit *en masse* Monica's aunts, the two old ladies of Moyne House,—Miss Priscilla and Miss Penelope Blake.

"They'll be frightened, I shouldn't wonder," says Dicky Browne. "A visit from a private individual is one thing; a visit from a regiment is another."

"What are the Misses Blake like?" asks Vera, in her soft voice. She is dressed in white again to-day, but her sash is different. It is of a deep claret color, and in her large white hat is an immense bunch of carnations of the same hue. Her *Suède* gloves are claret-color too, and reach far above her elbows. At present Mr. Burke is engaged in the arduous task of buttoning them. Judging by the expression of his face, one might safely conclude that "arduous tasks" of this sort are to him an unspeakable joy.

"Tell me about them," says Vera, looking calmly round her. "Doris knows them, and so does Mr. Browne," glancing at that gentleman, who is lost in admiration of her youthful charms.

"Dicky to *you*," he says, tenderly, forgetful, or purposely disregardful, of the fact that he is "Dicky" to all his world.

"Dicky, then," says Miss Costello, lightly: she looks at him, and bursts out laughing. "I wonder if you know how funny you are," she says, with her pretty red lips parted and her blue eyes gleaming; "does he know, Donat?" She is already great friends with her brother-in-law.

"Do you, Dicky?" asks Lord Clontarf.

"Well, I have always felt I was rather an acquisition to society than otherwise," says Mr. Browne, modestly.

"Monica, won't you bring Moses?" asks Kit, hesitating on the hall-door steps. She is alluding to her nephew, the heir of the house of Desmond, whose real name is George; but Kit has given him a second christening, by which he is known as Moses, in consideration of his cradle being made of some things she insists are bulrushes, and because, as he never cries, he must be meek.

"Oh, no," says Monica.

"What a pity he can't come!" says Vera, who had been making a very pretty picture of herself with the child just after luncheon.

"I'll carry him to Moyne for you, if you think you can't get on without him," says Dicky, gallantly.

"May he, Mrs. Desmond?" asks the pretty new-comer, turning her large blue eyes entreatingly upon Monica.

"Dicky!" says Monica, in horror at the very thought: "why, I don't believe he could carry a cat in safety." As she says this, however, she is conscious of feeling regret at being obliged to refuse the pleading of those wonderful blue eyes. It seems to her as though she were making one baby happy at the expense of another. "She is certainly

very young," says Monica to herself; "much younger than Kit. I suppose she hardly knows what a lover means yet. How I wish"—with a sigh—"Kit didn't!" Then aloud to Vera, "You shall have baby when you come back here by and by, all to yourself, for half an hour," she says, gently; "but he is asleep now."

"Ah! thank you," says Vera, with a pretty show of subduing herself gracefully to the decrees of fate.

The sun has grown almost fierce by this time: armed with huge white umbrellas, they go down the road to Moyne, falling into such order as fancy dictates to them.

Though the afternoon is fair as early summer, and warm almost to a fault, there is still a suspicion of coming dissolution on all around. These last three or four radiant days are only, as it were, the change before death. The leaves are all turning into warmer shades,—reds, crimsons, and russets,—making gay the shadows of the woods on either hand. From branch to branch the birds fly lightly,—

> "With wings that seem as they'd a soul within them,
> They bear their owners with such sweet enchantment—
> Their rapturous trilling fills the air with softest melody."

"Who can speak of summer as gone," says Kit, dreamily, "with such music sounding in our ears?" She is walking by Neil Brabazon's side in a state of deep content, to Monica's everlasting discomfiture, who cannot keep from sighing over Mr. Mannering's satisfactory thousands.

"Kit," she says, suddenly, looking across the road at her refractory sister, "your complexion will be ruined if you persist in walking in the full glare of the sun. Come here, into the shade."

Mr. Mannering is in the shade,—indeed, "very much in the shade," as Dicky Browne remarks, in a low but feeling tone.

"I would," says Kit, nicely, "but I am afraid on that side of the road the briers would tear my umbrella."

"They don't tear mine," says Monica, meaningly.

"Yours is a little smaller than mine, I think," returns Kit, sweetly.

"Larger, if anything, I fancy," says Monica, with the utmost mildness. "I am really afraid, dearest, that if you stay so long in the sun you will get one of your horrid headaches."

"I'll come over to you if you like," says Kit, in a tone of the deepest resignation; "but, if I do, I know I shall get my toothache back again. Heat is the only cure I know for it."

Toothache *versus* headache! Need it be said?—Kit car-

ries the day, and Monica wisely refrains from further persuasion.

"Oh! that if!" says Mr. Browne, regarding Miss Beresford with intense admiration. "Truly Shakespeare was a great man when he discovered there was 'much virtue in if.'"

"Mrs. Desmond is evidently not on our side," says Brabazon, regretfully, to Kit, coloring a little.

"Monica is mercenary," says Kit, disdainfully, "that is, mercenary for me. If she were in my place now, just catch her marrying a Mr. Mannering! Look at him now! Do look at his nose against the sky!"

It is certainly a goodly nose, so far as length goes.

"I am afraid she won't hear of it," says Mr. Brabazon, not even consoled by this unkind criticism.

"I'm afraid she will," says Miss Beresford; "and a great deal of it, too. Why should I not speak? It is most absurd the way she is going on. She says it is sinful of me to wilfully refuse a good offer, because I have no fortune of my own; yet I am positive she would have married Brian had he been even poorer than you." Then she looks at him reflectively. "Why on earth aren't you rich?" she says, reproachfully.

"Why, indeed? It is all the fault of that wretched old uncle of mine! What can a man want to get married for at seventy-five? He ought to be preparing for heaven then! Who could have thought of such a thing?"

"No one, I hope,"—severely; "it's too disgraceful a thought to enter into the mind of any respectable person. To tell the world you were his heir for twenty years, and then to get married! There ought to be a law to forbid such things."

"And to a girl of nineteen, too!" says Brabazon, piling up the agony. "Why,"—with a sort of grim mirth,—"my aunt is younger than me by six years."

"Bad as Sir Michael has proved himself, she must be far worse," says Kit.

"She—she's very pretty," says Mr. Brabazon, reluctantly.

"That only makes her more contemptible in my eyes. She must have a most unenviable mind."

"She seems a good-natured little thing,"—with a stern regard for truth.

"If you mean to tell me, Neil," exclaims Miss Beresford, turning upon him indignantly, "that a woman who could deliberately sell herself for money is an angel, both in face and mind, of course there is nothing more to be said."

"Perhaps she was persuaded into it by her people," says Neil, with a last effort at maintaining his cause.

"Oh, very well," says his beloved, with awful calm: "when I am persuaded by my people into marrying Mr. Mannering, I hope you will call me an angel too! That's all!"

"Darling, how can you say such dreadful things to me," says Brabazon, in a voice so dejected that her heart smites her.

"Then you mustn't call other people angels," she says, lowering her eyes.

"I don't think I did," meekly.

"Well, it was all the same," says Kit, after which peace is restored.

Vera, who is a little in advance of them, is conversing merrily with Gerald Burke, dropping a word every now and then to Doris, who is singularly silent, even for her, and responds to Brian's or Dicky Browne's sallies with only an occasional meagre smile. She is very pale, and the dark rings round her eyes are suggestive of either tears or sleeplessness last night.

"You don't look well," says Monica, gently. "Tired?"

"No."

"She was crying, I think," says Vera, in her clear sweet voice, glancing at her over her shoulder.

Lady Clontarf's pale cheeks grow crimson.

"No, Vera, I was not," she says, very gently, but with decision. Only a clever student of character would have noticed the touch of agonized fear that underlies her tone. Involuntarily as she says this she glances at Clontarf, to find that he is attentively regarding her, with a curious smile. In her present mood, this smile maddens her; for an instant her great eyes blaze with suppressed anger. Then the haughty look returns to them, and she turns contemptuously away.

"But indeed I think, Dody——" begins Vera.

"Think of something more interesting than me," interrupts her sister, with soft haste. "I could not sleep,"—turning to Monica,—"I often can't. It is a common trick of mine to lie sometimes for half the night with my eyes open."

"A very foolish trick," says Clontarf, unsympathetically, who, without seeming to pay any attention to her words, is evidently aware of everything she says.

For the second time she looks at him steadily from under her heavily-fringed lids, but again says nothing.

"What a pretty field!" says Vera at this moment, pointing at one on her left hand. "I should like to run across it."

"I'll take you," says Mr. Burke, with remarkable readiness. By this time it has become apparent to everybody

that Mr. Burke has neither eyes, nor ears, nor wit, for any one but the little pretty childish "thing of beauty" beside him.

"Can't we all go this way?" asks she, glancing at him demurely, at which his countenance falls. A wild hope that she wished to be alone with him is at once smitten in the bud. "Can't we?" she says again, appealing prettily to Monica: "see,—it is so much nicer than the dusty road."

"So it is," returns Mrs. Desmond. "Yes, it will be quite a short cut to Coole."

"Fields are the homes of mad bulls," says Mr. Browne, as if reading from a book,—"in more expressive language, their 'happy hunting-grounds.' Bulls have horns; horns hurt. I can't bear running for my life in hot weather: can you, Mannering?"

Mr. Mannering, who is short-sighted, having carefully screwed a glass into his best eye, gazes apprehensively over the field.

"I don't see an animal anywhere," he says, complacently. "I think we may venture."

"You can't have known many bulls," persists Mr. Browne, regretfully. "You can't have studied them, as *I* have, or you would understand their tendency to lurk. They are lying in ambush now, somewhere, to catch us unawares. You won't know where they are," says Dicky, waxing confidential, "until you feel the horns. It will be a trifle late then."

"But where, my dear fellow, could they find a hiding-place in the bare fields?" says Mr. Mannering, impatiently.

"Behind those willows, down there in that far corner. Do you see it? That"—prophetically—"is a place where they would remain hidden for hours, waiting for their chance." Here he starts. "Eh? What? Did I see anything move just then?" he asks, in a tone of abject terror.

"Oh, nothing, nothing," says Mr. Mannering, testily. Then, fixing his glass on Kit, he says, mildly, "The road isn't so very dusty after all, is it?"

"Not very," says Miss Beresford, hoping devoutly he may take to it. He is evidently ill at ease. Every moment of his life spent out of town has been heretofore spent in Paris or Rome, so that country lore is new to him; and he finds nothing worthy of disbelief in the idea of ten or more wild bulls being congregated together in a careful corner, ready to rush out upon and devour the first unwary passer-by.

"What dreadful nonsense you talk, Dicky!" says Mrs. Desmond. "See, here is a stile: let us get into the field." It is nothing much of a stile, but still is of sufficiently in-

tricate construction to render a good deal of help necessary to get the girls over it. There are, too, only steps on the road side, and nothing to be done when you get to the top of it but to take an energetic jump into the field below, or else trust oneself to somebody's arms.

Vera, springing lightly to its upper step with the childish vivacity that is so great a part of her charm, is taken down bodily by Mr. Burke, who lingers over this most congenial task as long as he dares.

The others follow suit. Doris (who is the last to enter the field), watching them, feels a strange dull pain at her heart. They all care for (or at least are cared for by) somebody; she alone knows no answering heart. She sees the light in Gerald Burke's eyes as he looks at little Vera, and envies her with all her soul. She marks the tender tightening of Brian Desmond's arms around his pretty wife, as with gentle care he brings her to his side, lest her feet should come with undue force against the grassy ground. Over Kit she can see that Brabazon and Mr. Mannering are having a polite but bitter wrangle, and now some little word from Monica decides the day in favor of Mannering, who walks off with his reluctant prize.

"May I help you?" says Lord Clontarf, indifferently, as she makes a step forward to mount the stile. Even as he says this Dicky Browne, coming suddenly to her side, makes the same request. Some unaccountable impulse impels her to refuse the latter.

"Thank you, Dicky," she says; "Donat will give me his hand."

The moment after she would have given all the world to retract these words, but it is too late. Dicky has turned and is running after Desmond, and Clontarf is left alone with her.

He, standing on the farther side of the stile, looks up at her, and calmly holds out the hand she has accepted,—for the second time. There is a careful politeness about his whole manner that makes her heart sink within her. Why had she made that silly speech, that had betrayed for him a positive preference? It seems a very paltry thing about which to feel such strong emotion, yet the agony of shame she is enduring at this moment is hardly to be described.

She has mounted the stile very slowly, and now looks down at him, deep distress and entreaty in her beautiful eyes. The blood "flushes guilty in her cheeks," and for this soft blush she hates herself: she, the cold, self-possessed woman, to be thus betrayed into the acknowledgment of the fact that she is but a nervous girl after all! Her eyes grow more earnest, more imploring. Surely, surely he will understand her and will——

"Are you coming?" asks Clontarf, gently. He has indeed marked the expression of her eyes, and the crimsoning of her pale cheeks, and has drawn a degree closer.

"I think I can get down by myself," she says, making a desperate effort to recover her usual calmness, and failing hopelessly.

"Nonsense!" says Clontarf, almost roughly. "I suppose my touch can't contaminate you!"

And with this he takes her slender figure in his arms, and brings her to the grass beside him.

She has had no time for decisive protest, and, now the deed is done, can find nothing to say. A terrible feeling that he has had every right to do this thing—as great a right to take her in his arms as Brian had to take Monica—oppresses her and renders her dumb.

"Well," says Clontarf, "are you much the worse for that?" His tone is half angry, half mocking, but she makes no reply to it.

A hitherto unknown shyness is overpowering her, together with a desire for help of any sort, but Monica (she is very fond of Monica) is too far ahead to be of any use. She had been crying a good deal all last night, in spite of her assertions to the contrary, and now she is doing fierce battle with a desire to burst into tears anew. She is not well, she tells herself; she will be all right again to-morrow. But she wishes earnestly she had not called him "Donat" to his face. They have been married now for nearly six weeks, but she has never called him by his Christian name before: she has indeed found a terrible difficulty about so doing, and has often waited a full minute to catch his eye, rather than be compelled to address him in so familiar a fashion.

"I am sorry you did not sleep last night," says Clontarf, presently, breaking the silence again. His tone is quite changed now. It is at least kindly, and there is in it a sort of carefully-subdued concern. "I am sorry, too, that Vera should have even thought you had been crying."

"Does one smile when one is sorry?" asks she, looking straight before her. "I watched you just then as Vera said that, and—— Why did you smile?"

"At your evident horror of being suspected capable of feeling of any kind."

"To feel is to suffer. One naturally shrinks from that. My honest desire is to discover myself a being devoid of feeling of any sort."

"Determination won't aid you there," says Clontarf. "Nature must be blessed—or cursed—for that."

"True; but at least I can say I have not, up to this, been overburdened with sensibility," says Doris, coldly. "I

have gone, so far, into my life without any great feeling of any sort."

"You should count yourself fortunate." Then, abruptly, "What were you crying about last night?"

To this—regarding it as being possibly meant to give the lie direct to her last words—she makes no reply.

"Tell me," persists he.

"You heard what I said to Vera. I had not been crying."

"I heard,—yes; but that did not deceive me: I could see for myself. Are you unhappy?"

"No."

"That means you are happy?"

"Certainly. Why should I not be?"

"Your marriage with me has not caused you any regret?"

"Regret?"—haughtily: "why should it? I was neither coerced nor persuaded."

"And besides, you might add, it isn't enough of a marriage to cause that," says Clontarf, with a short laugh. "As far as I can see, it is only those people who have married from pure affection who ever bicker and fight. We shall be spared all that."

"If your theory prove a correct one."

"You have your doubts, then?"

"Of our escaping the bickering and fighting?" asks she, quickly.

Clontarf laughs.

"Well, no; that is hardly what I meant," he says; but he does not pursue the subject.

They have come up with the others now, at the farther end of the field, and all stand for a moment to admire the pretty river that flows at their feet. Then they pass over stepping-stones, and find themselves in the Moyne grounds, to Dicky Browne's everlasting regret.

He has had quite a good time of it crossing that field, and is sorry it is over. He had enjoyed himself more than I can say, and had found an unalloyed pleasure in rushing up noiselessly every now and then behind Mr. Mannering to give vent to a hideous bellow in his ear. He had been quite delighted with his own performance,—which was really excellent, as any bull might well have been proud of the abominable row he made,—but was perhaps even a good deal more pleased with Mr. Mannering's reception of it. The sudden springs into the air, and the low moans of terror that emanated from that persecuted man, upon every repetition of the noiseless rush and accompanying bellow of Mr. Browne, were most eminently gratifying to the latter. He had varied his entertainment by crying "Look out!" and "Here he comes!" at such moments when it had seemed to him that his victim was growing sentimental in

the converse with Miss Beresford,—thereby doing Neil Brabazon much incalculable service.

But now it is all at an end, the Rubicon—the boundary-line between Coole and Moyne—is passed, the treacherous field and its willows lie behind them, and Mannering "is himself again."

"How nice the old house looks," says Monica, fondly, as they come up to it. "I do hope they are in,"—meaning her aunts.

"Why, see! there they are," cries Kit, pointing to a charming old-fashioned garden on their left; and straight as an arrow from the bow she darts from them, and is soon in the arms of two old ladies who are pottering up and down among the late flowers.

CHAPTER VIII.

"And sickerly they were of great disport,
And full pleasant, and amiable of port."

WARMLY, if with difficulty, they embrace her,—one being armed with a trowel, the other with a garden-fork, with both which dangerous weapons they threaten every instant to dig, or pierce, the intrepid girl. Happily, however, no tragedy occurs, and by the time the others come up it has providentially occurred to the Misses Blake that the earth will be a safe resting-place for their warlike accoutrements. Therefore they stand them very upright in the ground, lest, a small shower coming presently, the handles should be rotted to a pulp.

They are not pretty old ladies; and they haven't at all the snowy hair neatly banded, the aquiline noses, and the heavenly smiles that evidently distinguish all the old ladies in the world except those I know. I am afraid the Misses Blake are ugly old ladies, if anything; but, for all that, they have their own charm, in the kindliness and earnestness of their expression. If they are of any "world, worldly," it must be of a very old world and one rich in all the virtues.

Doris they greet with many marks of favor, and Dicky Browne with smiles. To every one they give it to be understood that their coming is to them a great pleasure.

"Well, now, my dear, I hope you have all come to spend the afternoon with us," says Miss Priscilla to Monica, holding her hand and patting it softly.

"Yes, if you will have us, auntie."

"Tut, tut! Now, that is very nice of you," says Miss Priscilla, looking round upon them all. "And we"—with a beaming eye—"can have tea brought out here, because the evening is so beautiful, and no midges to speak of."

"Were you gardening, auntie?" asks Kit.

"Why, yes, my dear: sometimes we like to look things up a bit. Dennis is so careless: he requires perpetual spurring. Only just now we found five weeds in these beds; five, I assure you! We counted them."

"Yes, indeed, five, my dear," says Miss Penelope, who is her elder sister's echo on most occasions. "Lord Clontarf, don't throw away that cigar, please. It will do the plants good, I'm told."

"If so, two cigars will do them twice the good," says Mr. Browne. "Did you hear that too, Miss Penelope?" Whereupon Miss Penelope laughs, and tells him he is "a naughty boy."

"You saw all the bad accounts in the papers this morning, auntie?" asks Monica.

"Oh, my dear, don't talk of it," exclaims Miss Priscilla, lifting her mittened hands on high. "Your Aunt Penelope and I were literally electrified with horror. That shocking murder in Westmeath, and that outrage on those poor inoffensive cattle in Kerry! You have heard too, of course, how the telegraph-wires between this and Clonbree were cut last night, and how some of the posts were even levelled with the ground?"

Clonbree is a small town, about seven miles from Rossmoyne, where a detachment of the 36th Regiment is quartered.

"It looks as if these Land Leaguers are desirous of cutting off communication between us and the soldiers in Clonbree," says Desmond.

"My dear Brian, do you really think so?" says Miss Blake. "What a terrible thought! Well, there is the Almighty always to defend the weak. And if these miscreants do attack our houses, we must only defy them to the last, and then die like good Christians." As the intrepid old lady says this, she turns her calm eyes on Monica, and smiles gently.

"Nobody would dream of harming you: you are too well beloved," says Brian, sitting down beside her. "I should think this is the safest house in the country."

"Then why not come here, my dear boy, you and Monica, and that darling child?"

"What! and desert our posts, and miss the fun?" says Desmond, laughing and kissing her withered cheek. "What do you take us for? Besides, I am only talking idle nonsense. They have no idea of attacking any one,

and least of all The Desmond in his den. The old man has proved himself too much for them, long before this."

"Will you take *me* in, Miss Blake?" asks Dicky, in a trembling tone. "Oh, do! I'm a harmless stranger, and half an orphan; and unkind friends have inveigled me on to your Irish soil: something ought to be done for me. I feel a settled conviction that Coole is going to be attacked at midnight by a surging mass of rioters, and I can't bear the idea of having to face the fury of the mob in—in my night-gown."

"Really, Dicky!" says Monica.

"I can't help my modesty," says Mr. Browne, reproachfully; "I was born so: surely you wouldn't like to think I *could* bear the idea, would you? Miss Blake,"—mildly, —"have I your permission to ask Miss Beresford the cause of her ill-timed merriment?"

"I was only thinking what a charming picture you would make (in the costume you mention), flying before the infuriated foe," says Kit, in an ecstasy of delight over some fanciful sketch in her own brain.

"Your humor is no doubt your strong point," says Mr. Browne, loftily, "but I fail to see where it should come in here. 'Levity of behavior,' says Seneca, 'is the bane of all that is good and virtuous.' I am profoundly sorry for you."

"How does your new maid get on, auntie?" asks Monica.

"Very well, my dearest,—very well indeed,—though a little too fond of her walk after dinner. I don't blame her for that, of course, but I don't know how it will be when the darker evenings come on. However, when engaging her I said something on the subject. 'You must always manage to be in in good daylight, Matilda,' I said; I particularly mentioned the 'good daylight.'"

"If a desire for exercise is her only fault," says Lady Clontarf, "you may count yourself very fortunate."

"Well, there is something else, my dear,—a trifle too, no doubt, but rather trying to one's patience. The fact is, she is rather troublesome about the post-boy."

"I don't blame her for that," says Mr. Browne: "I hate post-boys myself: they are the malicious tools of insolent tradespeople."

"How fraught with feeling is the eloquence of our Dicky!" says Mr. Desmond.

"But Matilda doesn't hate him," says Miss Blake. "I'm afraid she does the other thing. It is Michael, you know, Monica,—that tall fair young man; he—but I beg you will sit down, my dearest girl: you know how it goes to my heart to see you standing, now you've got that big boy to call upon you." This last in the softest whisper; where-

upon Monica, blushing a beautiful crimson, sits down beside the old auntie and slips her hand into hers.

"Talking of Matilda, my love, you see she will go to the door every morning when the post arrives, she *says* to get the letters (though that is plainly Ryan's duty), but we *know* it is to speak to Michael. That too is very natural; but why keep us waiting for our news for fully a quarter of an hour? We timed her yesterday."

"Yes,—quite a quarter," says Miss Penelope, sadly.

Clontarf and Brian are laughing heartlessly. Dicky Browne is as grave as a judge.

"Why don't you circumvent her?" he says; "why don't you get to the door before her? When I come to you on that visit we spoke of a few minutes since, I'll say how d'ye do to Michael before his Matilda has time to grasp the fact of his being there."

"We have expostulated with her," says Miss Blake, "many times. I said, 'Matilda, why not bring the letters first to us, and then go back to speak to Michael if you *must?*' That was mild, my dear Brian, wasn't it? But I assure you she quite lost her temper about it, and cried to such an extent that she terrified us, and wouldn't leave off, until we had induced her to drink two glasses of sherry. She said she didn't want ever to speak to Michael, and that the delay was caused by gravel getting under the hall door, which prevented her shutting it. But I don't think, my dear, there can be gravel under it every morning: do you?"

"I should think you will be very glad when she marries him. She is going to marry him, isn't she?"

"Yes, my dear, next Shrovetide, I believe. I made her mother confess so much; but they hate confessing to their engagements."

"Why has she gone into service at all, if she means to quit it in a few months?" asks Lady Clontarf, idly: she is watching little Vera in the distance as she flits to and fro, a sunnier sunbeam than those around her.

"To learn housekeeping, my dear, of course," says Miss Priscilla, vaguely. "Young people going to be married, in my time, always learned how to make soups, and metheglin, and jellies, and omelets, and——"

"Soups, omelets!—my dear Priscilla! I don't think Michael will be able to afford all these; consider their station in life," interrupts Miss Penelope, mildly.

"Ah! true: yes, of course," says Miss Blake, somewhat hurriedly, whose thoughts had been running to regions far removed from Matilda. "Well, at least she might learn not to keep people waiting."

"And at the same time she can learn to wait herself,—a

great thing if she ever means to enter service again," says Mr. Browne, suggestively.

"She is rather put out to-day, because Michael is laid up with a bad cold, and, a decent substitute being difficult to get, the postmaster has begged us to send a messenger for the post, for the next few days. Of course it is no trouble, and we hope Michael—such a respectable young man, my love—will be up and about again shortly. So we have drafted in a boy of the Cantys',—your Bridget's brother, my dearest girl,"—this to Monica, who is always her "dearest girl,"—"and he has gone to-day for our letters."

"Gone! Haven't you got your letters yet?" asks Kit.

"No, my dear. Madame O'Connor always sends us the 'Irish Times:' that is how we knew about the shocking occurrences we were talking about just now. But the 'Cork Constitution' and the 'London Times,' which we always take, have not yet arrived. He seems slow, certainly, the Canty boy, doesn't he?" says Miss Blake, consulting her watch. "He has been gone since half-past nine, and it is now twenty to four. Dear me! that sounds a long time, considering the village is only a mile and a half from this."

"Perhaps he is in love with Michael's sister," says Dicky. "If so, he could hardly do less than drop in, to know how his future brother-in-law is getting on."

"I don't think it is that," says Miss Penelope, seriously. "I have myself a strong suspicion that he has dropped the letters one by one along the road, without knowing it, and is now afraid to come here and tell us of it. He looks as if he couldn't hold anything tightly."

Just as she says this, an apparition at the garden gate attracts the attention of all. It is that of a frowsy youth, red-headed, and red-handed,—though not in a criminal sense,—and in a high state of perspiration and exhaustion.

"Why, there he is," says Miss Priscilla. "Poor boy! what a state of fatigue he is in! He must have been running all the way.—Well, Canty,"—graciously,—"you have come?"

"Yes, miss," wiping his brow, which is indeed greatly in need of that refreshment. Then—"I've brought it, miss," cries he, triumphantly, with a smile that once seen is never to be forgotten, so surpassing is it in excessive ugliness.

"Well, I'm glad of that; though I think you might have been a little quicker about it," says Miss Priscilla, with mild censure.

"Faix I couldn't, miss. Ye don't know what 'twas like, when ye spake like that. It was so heavy we thought we wouldn't be able to bring it at all at all."

"Heavy! Give it to me," says Miss Blake, with a view to solving her amazement at once.

"I left it in the front of the house, miss."

"What for?" says Miss Blake, with subdued indignation. "Was that a proper place for it? Was there ever so impossible a boy? Go and bring it here directly, Canty; do you hear?"

"Here, miss, is it?" asks the frowsy boy.

"Yes. It must be some very important post," says Miss Priscilla, pursing up her lips thoughtfully. "Heavy, he said, and certainly he looked very exhausted. Dear me! what can it be? You won't mind my just opening it, will you, my dear?" to Lady Clontarf.

Doris has barely time to say, "Oh, no!" when the sound as of something ponderous being dragged along the gravel walk makes itself heard. Then Canty's head again appears, and the heads of two other men besides, and finally an immense piece of timber, rounded, and blackened with tar.

Every one rises, and strains his or her neck in a wild endeavor to discover the meaning of this travesty.

"What on earth is that?" demands Miss Priscilla, straightening her arm majestically and pointing at the timber with her forefinger. "What do you mean, Canty, by bringing that pole to my garden?"

"Why, ye towld me, miss."

"I told you, boy! To bring that dirty flag-staff, maypole, mast (*what* is it, my dear Brian?) into my garden? Canty, this is either a disgraceful piece of impertinence, or Providence has seen fit to make your brains even less than they were."

"Faix an' indeed, miss, ye did tell me. The gintlemen will bear me out in that," says the discomfited Canty, almost in tears. The other two men, standing silently by, seem to find a fund of amusement in the scratching of their heads. Canty looks weakly round him, but the "gintlemen" upon whom he has fondly reposed his trust basely fail him in his need. They are all silent from amazement,—all, that is, except Mr. Browne, who is silent too, but from a totally different cause. He is, I regret to say, speechless with laughter.

"What did I tell you to bring?" asks Miss Priscilla, with the calmness of despair.

"Why, the post, to be sure, miss, an'"—with another (but now rather watery) gleam of triumph—"here it is!"

"The telegraph post?" says Miss Priscilla, in a faint voice, sinking back into her seat.

"Me an' Jim Duffy an' Dan Clancy," goes on Canty, in a deeply-injured snuffle, "went west there to Freehane's

where they towld us the first post had been thrown last night. An' we tackled it, an' what wid pullin' and dhraggin' we brought it here; but a mighty tough job it was all the same. An' I'm sure we wouldn't have done it at all, miss, if we thought ye would be so down on us in the end; but indeed ye towld——"

"Bless me! the boy's a fool," says Miss Priscilla. "There, go away, Canty, and take your post and your friends with you."

Then there is a consultation between Canty and his friends behind the shrubberies, and finally Canty appears again.

"I'm off, miss," he says, pulling his forelock; "but the men says as how they'd be thankful to yer honor for a thrifle. 'Twas as heavy as lead, miss, an' the day meltin' wid the heat, an'——"

"Go to cook. Tell her to give you half a crown and some beer, and then go away,—go away *forever!*" says Miss Blake; "let me never see your face again."

"Why, what have I done, miss?"

"I told you to get me my letters, and instead——"

"Yer letthers, is it? Arrah, why didn't ye say that before, miss? Yer letthers down wid the ould chap in the village, ye say? Sure I'll have them for ye in the twinklin' of an eye. 'The post,' says she, an' 'the letthers' just as aisy. Aych! but the quality's quare," says Mr. Canty to the brim of his caubeen; after which he departs first for his beer, and then for his native town.

"Thank goodness, here comes the tea," says Miss Priscilla, with a sigh of relief, as a neat-handed Phillis comes slowly across the garden, an old man following her. Both are laden with tea and cakes, and one or two liqueurs and yellow cream in quaint old silver ewers, and purple plums, and dainty little three-cornered bits of pastry, piping hot.

"Dicky my dear, and you, Neil, will you bring those rustic tables a degree closer to me? Here, Matilda, place the tea here, and come back soon to see if we want anything. I'm so distressed," says Miss Blake, looking apologetically round her, "that you should have been made uncomfortable by that stupid episode of Canty's; it is really too bad."

"Ah! if you only knew what a treat it has been," says Lady Clontarf, laughing all over again as she thinks of it. It had indeed taken her out of herself, and released her from the demons of regret that have been pursuing her all day and far into last night. She had joined as gayly in the merriment caused by the frowsy boy as any of them, and just now her eyes are alight and she is looking charming.

"The Irish peasant in his raw state is not very much to my taste," says Mr. Mannering, critically.

"You would prefer him cooked? Well, I'm not sure he'd do even then," says Mr. Browne, in a tone mildly argumentative. "Canty now, for example, would be—I should say—tough, unless decidedly overdone. Indeed, I think soup should be made of Canty to insure digestion."

"I have read a good deal on Irish character," goes on Mr. Mannering, ignoring with much dignity Dicky's interruption, "and I have always looked upon the accounts of their wit, and the amount of intelligence conceded to them, as statements that should be taken *cum grano salis.*"

"Oh, certainly," says Dicky, affably, with all the air of one who is generously allowing a point to his adversary. "Roast or boiled, I should say Canty would be the better of that!"

At this Kit laughs out loud, and Vera (who has wandered up to them by this time with her hands full of flowers, and Mr. Burke in her train) laughs too. She—Vera—is sitting on a low garden-chair, and is digging her little, sharp white teeth into a purple plum, with an open enjoyment that suits her.

"Little gourmand," says Gerald Burke, leaning over her chair and whispering into her ear. His pale, calm, intellectual face is alight with all the glory of a first great passion.

Vera, looking over her shoulder, smiles at him, and in her childish rapid way holds up half of the luckless plum, and puts it into his mouth. "Ah, Mr. Burke, who is a gourmand now?" she says, gayly.

"I wish you would call me Gerald," says the young man, earnestly, in a very low tone, meant for her ears alone. Not that he would have objected to all the world knowing of his love for her, but because it is so sweet to a lover's heart to believe himself alone, at least in thought, with his beloved.

"H'm?" says pretty Vera. She has a most enchanting way of making this questioning sound. She keeps her lips closed when she makes it, and looks up with smiling expectation at the person addressed out of her innocent blue eyes, that always seem full of babyish wonder at the oddities of the great world into which she has fallen in some unaccountable fashion.

"I want you to call me Gerald," says the young man again.

"Doris," says Vera, softly but clearly,—she has a wonderfully clear voice at all times,—calling to her sister across the grass, "Mr. Burke wants me to call him Gerald. May I?"

Naturally, every one looks at Mr. Burke, who has started a little and flushed a good deal. He is certainly confused (in a degree, not having expected Vera's taking such open action in the matter), but not unbecomingly so, and he now looks at Lady Clontarf very earnestly, as though anxious for an answer.

Though every one looks at him, nobody laughs, not even Dicky Browne, to whom any mirthful sensation is as the breath of his nostrils. There is something about Gerald Burke that demands from his fellows not only affection, but reverence.

"Certainly, dearest, if you like," says Lady Clontarf, a tiny pink shade showing itself in her pale cheeks.

"And you wish it too, then?" says Vera, with childish persistence.

"If you do," says Doris, smiling, but the pink shade has grown a degree deeper.

"Ah, then, I may call you Gerald," says Vera, glancing over her shoulder again at her attendant swain with the prettiest smile, that really might mean anything at all.

"What a funny little thing she is!" says Kit to Brabazon.

"Very," gravely; "but I don't think she should have asked that question, at least not now,—not before us all."

"Perhaps not; but there isn't a bit of harm in her," persists Kit, though vaguely. "She is quite a baby in some ways."

"Yes? Well, I'm glad you are not," says Neil.

Soon after this they all rise, and, bidding good-by to Miss Priscilla and Miss Penelope, wend their way homewards through the soft grasses, over which comes to them, from the village, sweetly, faintly, the sound of distant bells, "that music nighest bordering upon heaven."

CHAPTER IX.

"For, though she died, I would none other make;
I will be hers till that the death me take."

"ARE not all creatures subject unto time?" Though Kit would have wished the days to linger now (because of the sweet companionship they insure to her with the man she loves), still they relentlessly go by, and now his visit at Coole is almost at an end.

A month has passed away, and sunny September has

smiled itself to death, and rude October blows shrill blasts above her grave. The leaves are falling, falling, sadly, dolefully. Not a path but is strewn with these poor messengers of death. The "merrie birdes of every sorte" are silent, and seem half to forget that there was once a time when with glad heart they all with one accord "chaunted alowd their cheerful harmonee." The very streams are sound asleep, or else chilled into so low a murmuring that their voices cannot be heard.

Still the sun, as though in warlike defiance of great Winter's power, sits up aloft, enthroned, and shines persistently. 'Tis but a sad defiance, though; and pale and cold and dreary is the glory of the erstwhile brave Apollo!

But, as if to make up for other music, Kit's voice rings sweetly through the sullen air, as she saunters through the gardens. She is singing with quite an abandonment of self at the very top of her fresh young voice:

"Pack, clouds, away, and welcome day;
With night we banish sorrow;
Sweet air, blow soft, mount, larks, aloft,
To give my love good-morrow!
Blackbird and thrush in every bush,
Stare, linnet, and cock-sparrow!
You pretty elves amongst yourselves,
Sing my fair love good-morrow;
To give my love good-morrow,
Sing, birds, in every furrow!"

"Thank you, Kit! it is really a very delicate attention on your part, and one I'm not likely to forget. To remember me in this way is more than I dared to expect. I hope the birds will consider your petition, but they have been unsympathetically mute all the morning." Mr. Browne has put his head round a laurel-bush, and is regarding her with an expression full of tenderest gratitude.

"I wasn't thinking about you," says Kit, opening her eyes wide.

"How charming is the bashfulness of the youthful maiden!" says Dicky, rapturously. "But your pretty artifice, my dear, is quite thrown away upon me. I can see through it. Could I not hear you, as you came lilting up this walk, adjuring the little birds (by the bye, where are the little birds?) to give your fair love good-morrow?"

"Well?" says Kit.

"Well, that's me," says Mr. Browne.

"I'm sure I'm glad you told me of it," says Miss Beresford. "It might have given rise to much awkwardness, if I had been left longer in ignorance of it."

"It was a beautiful song you sang," says Dicky, thoughtfully. "And yet I think I see my way to improving on it.

The rhyming is sadly defective. Now, what would you think of this?—

> 'To give my love good-morrow,
> Sing, birds, in every forrow.'

'Forrow' sounds well—eh?—or perhaps

> 'Sing, birds, in every furrow,
> To give my love good-murrow'

would be better. Now, which do you prefer—eh?"

"Neither," says Miss Beresford, with decision.

"Strange! Well, but which do you think the best?"

"One is quite as good as the other, in my opinion."

"Or better, perhaps?" suggests Mr. Browne, reflectively. Just at this moment Neil Brabazon comes up to them.

"Dicky has been telling me such news," says Kit, turning to him with a joyful air.

"Yes? good news, by your eyes."

"You hear that, Dicky? But you shall judge for yourself. Without the slightest preparation, he just now told me that he is—'my fair love.'"

"He flattered himself," says Neil.

"By what authority do you say that, my good sir?" asks Mr. Browne.

"The best," says Neil.

"I scorn to pursue the subject further," says Dicky. "I shall conclude with one leading question. Pray, sir, if I am not her love, who is? Are you?" Though asked in jest, this proves an awkward question, and silence ensues upon it.

Brabazon, hesitating, looks at Kit, but, as that young lady declines to help him out of his difficulty, being indeed rather more embarrassed than himself, he says, gently, "Am I, Kit?" in a low tone, and with a decided blush.

"Assert yourself, Kit: say no at once," says Dicky, mischievously. "If you don't, this bold bad man will take your silence for consent."

"He may," says Miss Beresford, softly, blushing rosy red; and, turning abruptly to one side, she busies herself nervously with a tall shrub standing close beside her. Her business with it is so eminently vague that Mr. Browne is attracted by it.

"I am afraid it is a little early for birdsnesting, Kit," he says, mildly, at which they all three laugh, and the spell is broken, and Brabazon, taking her hand away from the escalonia, raises it impulsively to his lips.

"You might at least have spared me that," says Mr. Browne, with tragic reproach. "When a man's heart lies freshly torn and wounded, the sight of——"

"Mr. Brabazon," cries a soft voice, clear as a bell, from one of the drawing-room windows, "Come here; I want you. Can you spare me half an hour?"

It is the voice of Monica. She too, standing without purpose just inside the curtains of the window, had witnessed that impulsive caress, and her sisterly mind had been stirred to wrath by it. Not even the objectionable sight itself had seemed so bad to her as the fact of its having been committed before a third party. What will Mr. Mannering say if he hears of it?

Some inward feeling warns Brabazon that there is a bad time in store for him, as he rather slowly obeys her command. Something in her voice—a faintly peremptory ring in it—has struck upon his ear and given him a timely hint as to what lies before him. It is, therefore, with head erect, and a determination to defend his cause to the death, that he marches into her presence.

She makes some trivial remark to him as he enters the room,—something about the day's arrangements, that is of no interest at all,—and then presently, almost before he is aware of it, though mentally determined to be upon his guard, he finds she is talking to him of Kit.

With a little pale face, but with a good deal of light in her blue eyes, she states her case,—"Kit's case," as she tells him almost pathetically. Steadily, without undue haste at any point, she goes through it all,—his "admiration" for Kit, her girlish "fancy" for him, and all the rest of it. Touching as lightly as possible on his want of sufficient means to marry, she gives him nevertheless clearly to understand that here lies the difficulty.

Throughout he listens in silence, not attempting to edge in a word, and, to tell the truth, having no word to edge; but when at last she stops, as though for an answer to all she has said, the very blank following on the cessation of her voice brings back to him all his courage with a rush. On one thing at least he is resolved, he will not give up Kit, no, not for any one in the world, except herself; should *she* come to him, and tell him it must be so,—that the giving up is inevitable,—then, he tells himself, he will submit to cruel fate, and let his heart break with as good a grace as he can; but not till then!

"You would not have me be the one to end our engagement?" he says at last, slowly.

"Engagement!" says Mrs. Desmond, flushing warmly. "Kit herself assured me, only a few weeks back, that no such thing existed between you. It cannot exist! It would be impossible! You must see that."

"It is exactly what I cannot see. When Miss Beresford told you that there was nothing binding between us, of

course she said only the truth. It was, since then, that words were said—that I shall not be the one to recall."

"You induced her to engage herself to you,—here, in this house?"

"It was on the open road,—that night we all walked home from Kilmalooda."

"It was a breach of honor," says Mrs. Desmond, with a little flash from her large eyes, "to steal my sister from me! beneath my own roof!"

"I hope you do not understand the meaning of your words!" says Brabazon, haughtily, growing very pale.

"I am sorry if I have said too much," says Monica, impatiently. "But at least you must have known this whole matter would be distasteful to me. Simply,—*simply*," with emphasis, "because I do not consider she would be happy as a poor—that is," hastily, "unless she was the wife of a rich man. You must see this yourself. And, seeing it, you will release her from any promise she may have given." Here she pauses and looks at him anxiously. His eyes are bent upon the ground, and so she finds his face difficult to read.

"You will?" she says again, leaning a little towards him in her earnestness.

"No; I shall not," returns the young man, doggedly. His voice is very low, but very distinct, and Monica's courage declines. What if he persists to the end? Is Kit to become the wife of a briefless barrister?—Kit, who has an absolute genius for dressing herself, and likes a new gown once a fortnight!

"I think you should not give me such a decided answer," she says, more softly. "And whatever hard things I may say or have said to you, you should forgive, remembering how I have only her interests at heart, and that it is for her sake alone I say them. She is such a dear, dear girl, that it seems to me a terrible misfortune that she should be induced to do this thing."

"It is because she is such a dear girl that I feel I cannot afford to lose her," says Neil, firmly.

"You cannot afford to keep her, as it seems to me. You have three hundred pounds a year, she one hundred pounds. How can she live on that? What will it be to a girl accustomed to her carriage and her maid?"

"She hadn't a carriage when her mother was alive," says Brabazon, determined to fight it foot by foot, as a true lover should. "And I suppose a carriage can't be everything. She shall do just as she likes in all things, and my devotion will be hers forever. We have talked it all over many times, and she thinks she can get on without the carriage."

"We could all get on without the ordinary comforts of life, I dare say, if we had to," says Mrs. Desmond, despondently. "But should we be happy? I ask you,"—throwing out her hands in a little distracted fashion. "Do you honestly think she will be happy?"

"I think she will," stoutly. "She is not one of those soulless beings impossible to make happy except by such things as money can provide. She is a creature full of heart and brain; she is"—with a little sudden outburst of passionate fondness—"the best and sweetest girl upon earth."

"And you would condemn the best and sweetest girl upon earth to a life of actual poverty?"

"It shan't be poverty. I shall make a name for myself in time. The hope that lies before me will drag me upwards. Besides, I have some interest——"

"I don't believe in interest," says Mrs. Desmond, in a voice that is very nearly nasty. She is, in fact, quite on the verge of despair by this time, and almost on that of tears. She cannot help contrasting this tall, agitated, yet stern young man before her, most favorably, with the insignificant though wealthy Mannering. What chance indeed can the latter have, so long as Brabazon is before the girl's eyes?

"Then you mean to persist in this cruel engagement?" she says, presently, seeing he will not speak.

"I shall certainly not give her up, if you mean that,"—steadily. "Until she comes to me of her own accord, and tells me that her heart fails her,—that she shrinks from encountering the loss of many things that no doubt serve to make life sweeter,—I shall consider her my own property. Nothing shall come between us; nothing but that shall induce me to relinquish my claim on her. I speak thus plainly because I wish you quite to understand me."

"I quite understand that you are the most selfish man I ever met," says Monica, wrathfully, rising to her feet.

"I am sorry you must think thus badly of me," says Brabazon, sadly, yet with great dignity. "But would I be a man at all if I gave up the woman I love, and who loves me, by any less command than hers? I don't believe even you could think otherwise than meanly of me if I did so. I wish you could have continued my friend, but, as that is impossible——" He pauses.

"Yes, it is impossible,"—in a low tone.

"You know I intended going to my uncle's to-morrow for a few days before returning to town; it will, however,"—very gently,—"be better I should go to-day."

"No, no; not to-day," says Monica, unsteadily. "To-morrow, if you will, but please do not go to-day."

She has turned away her head, and with a slight bow Brabazon leaves the room.

When he is gone she sinks into a low chair and bursts into tears.

"Oh, *why* did his uncle get married at seventy-five?" she sobs, indignantly. "But for that, all might have gone so well. How determined he is, how decidedly he spoke! He is the most obstinate, ill-tempered, selfish and altogether"—with a fresh burst of grief—"quite the very nicest and handsomest young man I know."

CHAPTER X.

"With but one heart, in weal and in distress."

"I WONDER what the governor's ball will be like?" says Lord Clontarf, lazily.

It is the evening of the same day, and Lord and Lady Clontarf, with their guests, are dining at Coole. The ball referred to is to be given by the Marquis of Dundeady on the Tuesday in the following week, in honor of his daughter-in-law. Kit, who has been looking forward to it for a fortnight, expresses an opinion that it is safe to be charming.

"Sir Watkyn Wilde is coming to us to-morrow," says Clontarf. "He will be just in time for it."

"Who is Sir Watkyn?" asks Vera, turning her face from Gerald Burke, and the beauty of the silent night outside, to ask the question. Dinner is a thing of the past, and they are all standing in groups about the drawing-room.

"Don't you know him?" asks Kit, lifting her brows.

"I know nobody," says Vera, lifting hers in turn and smiling. "At least, certainly not Sir—what was it?"

"Oh, what a sad reflection that is!" says Dicky Browne: "seventeen good years gone by without even a bowing acquaintance with that remarkable man!"

"He is a toothless old baronet, with more money than he could spend in two lifetimes. He is the very thing for you, Vera," says Lord Clontarf, laughing.

"What on earth did you ask him for?" demands Desmond, who is smitten with amazement.

"I have just told you,"—still laughing:—"for Vera, to give her a chance of settling herself honorably in life. You owe me a debt of gratitude, Vera. A title always counts with a woman, you know."

There is a slight exclamation from Lady Clontarf. She has upset a tiny vase upon the gypsy table near her, and

now busies herself picking it up again. Her face is very pale.

"Whenever I see Sir Watkyn," says Monica, "I always think how well he would look on a bracket labelled "a rare antique—priceless.'"

"Or—'a fossil, date unknown,'" says Dicky Browne. "Do you know he has forgotten the time of his own birth, it is so long ago since his mamma presented him to an admiring world? As there is now nobody on earth as old as he is, I fear the precise year in which the presentation took place can never be exactly ascertained; that is, not to about a hundred years or so. Such a pity, isn't it? It would be so interesting to know whether it occurred the month or two before or after the flood. Before, I should say; but nothing is certain. When you get him down to your place, Lady Clontarf, be sure you ask him for a few private particulars about the first great travelling menagerie. As he was beyond all doubt in the Ark with Mr. Noah, he must know some little interesting details about that epoch that as yet have not been published."

"I don't think Dicky ought to get champagne at dinner," says Clontarf, regarding him with pity. "It disagrees with him, and helps to drown the little brains he has."

"Is Sir Watkyn really so old?" asks Vera.

"Not so old as Dicky makes him out," says Mrs. Desmond, "but certainly not bordering upon youth. How funnily he used to dress himself at one time!" They all laugh, as at some well-remembered joke. "Do you recollect his hats? his umbrellas? He was like an old clo' man."

"'He used to wear a long black coat
All buttoned down before,'"

quotes Kit, with an irrepressible outburst of merriment.

"Ah! how uncharitable all this is!" says Mr. Browne, gazing reproachfully around him. "How would you feel, Mrs. Desmond, if any one were to call you an 'old clo' man'? And, really, of late poor old Sir Watkyn has been doing his best to reform. When Nature failed him in the complexion line, he took to art, and paint worked wonders. When his crumbling old legs refused to obey further orders, he took to steel, with the most marvellous results. What more could he do to oblige his friends? He now wears nice little steel bands all over his body to keep him together. So good of him! What on earth should we do if he became dismembered? He sleeps in 'em! If he took 'em off, or even loosened 'em, he'd instantly fall to pieces. Isn't it interesting?"

"Dicky, I wish you would stop. It is really very horrid," says Kit.

"There is nothing horrid about Sir Watkyn, Katherine," says Mr. Browne, with severity. "He is a very dear old man,—so bland; so courteous; and his chuckle!—why, one would walk a mile to hear it. You wonder at that, Miss Costello, but, I assure you, to hear it is to feel morally refreshed! In spite of his patriarchal years, his imagination is richly adolescent, and there is all about him, indeed, a carefully cultivated air of irrepressible youth, that, combined with his dyed locks, makes him—er—makes him——"

"Go on, Dicky; you have been so eloquent up to this that we can't bear to see you stuck for a word now. Collect yourself. It makes him——"

"Well—er—— 'very sweetly, too utterly quite!'" says Mr. Browne, with a genial smile.

"I think I like old men," says little Vera, prettily. "They are always so kind to me."

"And what about the young men?" asks Brian, amused: "are they cruel to you?"

"I don't know anything about them," returns she, with a serious shake of her blonde head, that sets agoing all the short rings of her golden hair.

At this moment, The Desmond, who has been trying amiably, but in vain, to explain to Mr. Mannering the present state of affairs in Ireland, calls to the others from across the room.

"Come away from that window," he says: "I thought I got a scolding from somebody last week because I stood at one after nightfall for five seconds. Well, Brian, what's to be the order of the evening, eh? Whist, eh? Mannering and I will play any two of you. There!"

This the old Squire says heartily, laying his hand on Mannering's arm, because he fears the latter has been feeling himself rather out of it during the last hour. But, in truth, Mr. Mannering's opinion of his own social qualities is too sound to have admitted any such doubt.

Brian and Clontarf, after a smothered but heated argument with Mr. Browne, in which the latter comes off victorious, cross the room, and are soon seated at the whist-table. A nightly rubber is the joy of The Desmond's life: to hold even losing cards at it is a delight; to win, a supreme bliss!

The other occupants of the room still stand chattering idly at the window, laughing at this thing, arguing over that. Remarks from the whist-players reaching them now and then, turns their attention in that direction; a louder remark than usual tells them Mr. Mannering has unwarily trumped his partner's trick.

"It was the best card; the ace, king, queen, had been played; you must have seen it was the best card." The

Desmond, poor man, is more grieved than angered. Clontarf and Brian are a little red, possibly from suppressed mirth.

"Mr. Mannering seems to me to be a very indifferent hand at whist," says Lady Clontarf.

"Give you my word," says Dicky Browne, in a confidential whisper, "I don't believe he has yet mastered the exact meaning of the word trump. It is still to him a sealed mystery. I'm sure he thinks it is a name for a fifth suit, for which he is always searching. Look at him now. He is solemn enough to be a parish beadle."

"Does he ever smile?" asks Vera, regarding the unhappy delinquent at the other side of the room with a calmly wondering face.

"Not often. He has been known to do it, but I heard it was a relief to the observers when he left off.

> 'Seldom he smiles, and smiles in such a sort
> As if he mocked himself, and scorned his spirit
> That could be moved to smile at anything.'

This should be written below his portrait," says Dicky.

"He is dreadful," says Kit, suddenly.

It must be said that her lover's interview with her sister in the morning had been described to her in a very graphic fashion five minutes after it took place. Some words then used are still rankling in her mind; and she is prepared to pour out the vials of her wrath at every available opportunity on the head of the unhappy man upon whom she most unjustly visits all her troubles.

"He is dreadful!" she says again, with a little frown bent upon the unconscious Mannering. "How wondrous wise he looks! There is no need that any one should write him down an ass, as he has it always broadly written upon his forehead. Nay, but do look at him, Monica: his head is exactly like one of Brian's mangles, only there isn't half as much inside it."

She throws up her head with a naughty little laugh as she says this.

"He is an exceedingly good man," says Mrs. Desmond, severely,—"upright in all his ways, and—and very much to be esteemed." She thinks of his thousands as she says this, and Kit knows that she does. "I cannot see that there is any fault to be found with him."

"You forget his revoking powers and his nose," says Miss Beresford, who indeed is now quite from under all control.

"You are too young a girl to allow yourself sarcastic speeches," says Mrs. Desmond, in an even voice, but with open reproof.

"You are unkind to me," says Kit, flushing hotly, "and all for the sake of an unmitigated bore."

"But yet 'a good young man,'" interposes Mr. Browne, solemnly. "Let me impress that fact upon you. Mrs. Desmond has said it, and she knows. And, indeed," looking round him, "which of us can lay a sin to his charge? which of us can say we have ever heard him give way to so much as a great big D? No answer! Silence is loud in his defence! He *is* a good young man. Be generous, Kit (now that you can't help it), and acknowledge the fact."

"I have acknowledged it. I have just said he is a bore. All good young men are bores," says Kit, turning away.

Throwing open the window, she steps lightly on to the balcony, and, leaning over the railings, stares, without seeing them, at the brilliant stars and the softly floating moon. Vera, gliding past her, lays her hand upon her arm.

"That was funny,—what you said about Mr. Mannering's nose," she says, with her pretty childish laugh. "There is a great deal too much of it, isn't there? Why don't you tell him so? Perhaps he could get it shortened. And, even if he couldn't, why,"—here she laughs again,—"plain speaking of that sort does a great deal of good sometimes." She runs her fingers lightly, in a seemingly aimless fashion, up and down Kit's bare arm as she says this, then slowly withdraws them, and, with a swift inexplicable glance at her, follows Gerald Burke down the steps into the moonlit garden.

Kit gazes after her. Her tone had been the most careless thing possible, her laughter full of the thoughtless gayety of childhood. Yet had she meant anything? Had she meant to hint that it would be wisdom on Kit's part to say some small thing to Mr. Mannering,—not indeed about his nose, but some decided thing, that might enrage him, and cause him to desist from this "persecution" that is so distasteful to her? In this light has she brought herself to regard the unhappy man's devotion.

Whether Vera had meant it or not, at least she has put the idea into her head. But, then, how to carry it into practice? She—Kit—has indeed at times said harsh things to him, but nothing absolutely wounding to his self-love. Self-love is the rock on which most men's sentimental affairs can be wrecked. It seems to her that, though the advice—meant or unmeant—is sound, she can hardly bring herself to avail of it. Even now, as she only thinks of this indefinite wound that ought to be inflicted, she grows flushed and hot and miserable. How is she to wilfully make sore the heart of a man whose greatest fault is loving her against her will?

Then again she thinks of Vera. The pressure of the soft little fingers is still upon her arm, the ring of the silvery laugh within her ears. It has seemed to her now and then that there is about Vera a touch of subtlety that in a dreamy fashion has at times puzzled her,—in a fashion, indeed, so dreamy as sometimes to admit a doubt of the subtlety being there at all.

Beneath that babyish exterior there cannot be a surface as yet unprobed by friends or foes! It is impossible! Thinking again of the merry laugh, the sweet mouth, the tender azure trusting eyes, she casts out the doubt as being unworthy, and once more turns her eyes upon the starlit heavens.

"Dreaming?" says a voice at her elbow.

"Get me a covering of some sort, and let us go down to the garden," she says, looking gravely into Brabazon's face. As he returns to the drawing-room to obey her behest, she follows him with her eyes, and sees Lady Clontarf leaning forward in earnest converse with Monica.

"Yes, I hope she will marry him," Lady Clontarf is saying: "he is sufficiently well off; and, even if not, she has enough fortune to enable her to marry whom she chooses. I cannot tell you how fond I am of him; and I want Vera to be happy,—to have her life filled with love. Nothing else is of any good at all."

"Vera is very fortunate," says Monica, pensively: "she can afford the man of her choice. But you would not surely advise any girl to rush into poverty for the sake of love."

"I don't know; no, I suppose not,"—hastily, but uncertainly; "and yet, to gain a true and lasting love, would not the world be well lost in such a cause?"

"I think she must have been in love with somebody before she met Lord Clontarf," says Kit to herself, pityingly. But just then, Brabazon coming back to her, Doris and her supposed woes are speedily forgotten.

The gardens are flooded with a cold radiance. The moon, that "goddess excellently bright," seated in her silver chair, is dispersing abroad unlimited hospitality in the way of rays and beams. Vera and Gerald Burke, flitting like ghosts among the deserted flower-beds, disappear into the yew-walled garden beyond, as Kit and Neil reach the shrubberies.

"You were angry just now, darling," says Neil, fondly. "I was sorry for that; but yet I cannot altogether blame your sister."

Nevertheless, there is a soreness in his own heart as he remembers how she had accused him of that "breach of honor."

"I couldn't help it. She seems to spend her life of late fostering the cause of that silly man,—just as if"—angrily—"I should look at him. It is abominable of her; and before you, too! It is almost indelicate. But there is no knowing what a woman will not do where a 'good match' is concerned. How I hate it all!" Then she throws out her hand with a little angry gesture. "She meant you to hear it all," she says; "I could see that, and it maddened me. It was cruel of her! it was—— Oh, no, no!" with a vehement burst of penitence. "Dear, sweet Monica! I must not talk of her like this!"

"You must not, indeed. It is all for your own good she does it."

"That is as she thinks. It is all for my bad, as I think. And then she *will* speak of you as though you were only a passing acquaintance, a man met to-day to be forgotten to-morrow. She will take no notice of our love. That frets me so. She mentions your name to me just as if you were nobody in particular,—anybody, in fact!"

"I don't suppose I am of much account in her eyes," says Neil, gloomily.

"But you are, if only because she fears you. She only puts on that indifferent manner to discourage me,—as if she could! But it makes me wretched too, in spite of my scorn." This she says with a half-smile, that dies, however, almost as it is born. "She cannot prevent my being true to you, at all events; but I know she would if it were possible, and all because that old man of yours—your uncle, I mean—has chosen to marry again."

"That was indeed my undoing; and now I am of course to be forbidden the house?"

"Oh, no, not that. I am sure she did not mean that."

"I think she did. At least she meant enough to keep me from Coole until——"

"Until she sent for you. Oh, Neil! you would come to me then?"

"Well, yes, then." As he says this he knows he is not altogether angry with Monica. "But, sweetest heart, I am afraid that will be—never!"

"No, it will be some day; it shall. Brian is on our side, I'm sure. He will not say so, but yet I know it. And I will speak to Aunt Priscilla and Aunt Pen; *they* are not Mr. Mannering's trumpeters, and you shall come to see me at Moyne whenever you are staying at Lislee."

Lislee is about fourteen miles away, and is the property of a cousin of Neil's, with whom he sometimes stays.

"That will be as often, then, as ever I can," says Neil. "I don't know how I am to get on without you to-morrow." There is a depth of misery in his tone as he says this that

renders her speechless. Her own grief is too great to allow of her assuaging his. "I can't believe I shan't see you after to-night, and yet I know I *must* believe it." The tears are standing in his dark eyes. She is in his arms, with her head pressed against his breast, and is crying softly, but bitterly.

"I shan't return to Dublin until after the ball at the Castle. I shall see you there at least; and we can write to each other," he says, brightening. "And I can run down for a day or two now and then; and perhaps"—desperately—"it all will come right in the end."

"Perhaps so," says Kit, nervously. "But everything seems to be against us now. And—and there is something else: I'm afraid that horrid man inside is going to propose to me, in spite of all that has been done to prevent it. If he does, what am I to say?"

"Serve you quite right if he does," says Mr. Brabazon, severely. "It will be your own fault entirely; you have pretended to keep him off, but you haven't been a bit firm. And you know a fellow like that is always thick-skinned. Your manner to him on many occasions was a positive encouragement."

"I couldn't be terrible to him always," says Kit. "And whenever I did show him any favor it was when—when *you* were bad to me."

"*I* bad to you? When was that?"

"Oh, heaps of times! However,"—magnanimously,—"I will let that pass. Now, do tell me how I shall get out of it if he does come to the point."

"How can I? You confess you have encouraged him off and on: so now you must get yourself out of it as best you may." He is still rather offended.

"How can you speak to me like that, Neil? and now, too, when I am so unhappy. I can't bear you when you talk to me like that!"

This dreadful speech reduces him to submission directly:

"Don't say that. I was unkind to you, perhaps, but it makes me wretched to think you should ever have let—that—that—man believe, even for one moment, that you might accept him. As to what you are to do, just tell him plainly not to propose to you, as you haven't the faintest notion of accepting him."

"Oh, Neil! How could I place myself in such a false position? What! give him the chance of telling me in turn that he hadn't the faintest notion of asking me to do so? I couldn't, indeed."

"It would save a great deal of trouble, for all that, and a great many heartaches, if girls would only speak out plainly the moment they see a man they don't fancy beginning

to pay them extraordinary attention. However, if you won't—— Well, then let him propose at once, and so get rid of him forever."

"I wish Monica would tell him there was no chance for him."

"Monica thinks there should be, and that there will be, once I am out of the way."

"She will have to be undeceived, then: it is so *stupid* of her!" says Kit, vehemently. "Can't she see how it is with me? And yet she will allude to you quite as if you were anybody."

"I suppose I am 'anybody' to her."

"I shall insist on her regarding you as somebody."

"I think *you* are nobody," says the young man, suddenly, catching her in his arms.

"Oh!" says Miss Beresford. The exclamation is meant for his remark, not for his action. (Let us have the truth at any price.)

"Yes. I repeat it. Show me anybody like you, if you can! You are a thing apart, different from all others, and therefore 'nobody.' You are the dearest angel upon earth."

"I say, all you good people in the shrubberies, you are wanted," cries Dicky Browne's voice at this moment, dangerously close. "Don't be frightened; I'm not looking; my eyes are tight shut. But if you could bring yourselves to come back to earth and the drawing-room now, we should all be grateful. Family prayers—I beg pardon!—brandy and soda, and candlesticks, are awaiting you."

CHAPTER XI.

"Now, look ye, is not this an high folly?
Who may not be a fool, if but he love?"

THE music of the last new waltz is sobbing and sighing through the rooms; lightly hearts, as well as feet (and heads), are dancing. The marquis, bland, and a trifle more juvenile than ever, is still greeting his guests with all the fervor that distinguished him an hour agone. Lady Clontarf, standing beside him, is quite overshadowed by his magnanimous smile.

"Truly, he is a grand old man," says Mr. Browne, regarding him with unstinted admiration from afar. "Still,"—recollecting himself, and letting his ardor cool with a rapidity quite startling,—"what is he when placed in comparison with our grand old woman? She" (Mrs. Costello, to wit) "is a poet's dream."

"A poet's nightmare, if you like," says Clontarf, with feeling.

"She's been on the champ all day," says Dicky. "I called over to Kilmalooda in the morning, and chanced to see her; such a happy chance!" All this he says to Mrs. Desmond, who, with her partner, Lord Clontarf, is standing near him. "Rather overcome at finding myself suddenly in so noble a presence, I confess I felt nervous, and a strange longing to cut and run almost overcame me. Odd, wasn't it? I rallied, however, sufficiently to address her by her illustrious title, and to pay her as neat a little compliment as any flurried young man ever produced before at a moment's notice. I suppose her mind was filled with worthier matters, because she declined to see it. In fact, she sort of told me—well—to—*to get out*," says Mr. Browne, with a burst of—no, not indignation—mirth!

The rooms are growing crowded, though not to the agony-pressure of a town crowd, and programmes have been brought to that stage that if not filled now they will never be filled.

Lady Clontarf, in pale-green satin literally covered with Brussels lace, and with diamonds on throat and head and arms, is looking lovely—and calm as lovely—but smileless. The marquis, regarding her critically though furtively, tells himself he would gladly see her more mirthful. "In spite of the herrings, or the whiskey, or whatever it was," he says to himself, "she is so correct in feature that she might allow herself even a laugh. So few of them can! Nothing betrays them like a lapse into nature."

Mrs. Desmond is in maize; Miss Priscilla and Miss Penelope Blake, who came with her, in pearl-gray satin; Kit is in the highest spirits. I don't mean to insinuate by this that the mantle of "high jollity" that has fallen upon her is her only covering, because her gown has come straight from Worth, and is a marvel of its kind.

Vera is

> "Clad all in white, that seems a virgin best;
> So well it her beseems that ye would ween
> Some angel she had been."

In truth, with her soft smile and rapt eyes, she seems almost angelic. She is standing beside an old and withered man, dressed artificially in youthful clothing with a view of deceiving the public into the belief that the allotted threescore years and ten have not been yet attained by him. Vera, with her pretty head uplifted, is listening to his inane twaddle with a flattering attention. What sweeter thing can we behold than the delicate homage of youth to age?

"Vera is very good to that old man,—wonderfully good," says Mrs. Desmond, looking across at her. "I don't think

I care about old men myself, but apparently he is not so dull as most of them: I dare say he is better than he looks."

"He is not. He is worse," says Clontarf, gloomily. "Once he starts a subject, nothing will stop him. We have all tried to do it,—taking it in turns for the last week,—but without success. He carries out his argument to its dreary end. He is a shocking old man. He has got a voice like a corn-crake."

"To malign the absent is an evil deed," says Dicky, solemnly. "I at least will not be a party to it. Sir Watkyn is not to be despised. 'A good old man, sir, he will be talking; as they say, when the age is in, the wit is out;' but what of that? the age is in, at all events. That is the principal thing. He has got the pull of us there: very few of us can date back to the Ark."

The music is growing fainter, sadder, fading, as it draws towards death. The drip, drip of many fountains is growing clearer. From conservatories and halls and passages comes the cooler air, laden with the perfumed breath of flowers.

In a tiny flowered nest (that in daylight to-morrow will probably be called an anteroom), Vera, who has permitted herself to be dragged away from Sir Watkyn's side, is sitting with Gerald Burke, idly tapping the programme in her hand against her dainty lips.

"You will give me every second dance to-night?" asks Gerald, in a tone that admits of small delay in the answering. His melancholy eyes, deep and dark and full of mournful possibilities, are burning into hers.

"Will Doris like that?" asks she, letting her pretty fragile fingers fall clasped into her lap, and raising questioning eyes to his.

"If *you* will like it, that will be everything."

"Oh, that!" she says. Her lips part in a heavenly smile, she moves her graceful childish figure in a nestling fashion a degree closer to him, and looks at him again, still smiling, and lays her golden head, half caressingly, half laughingly, against his arm. "*I* should like it,—yes,—and for the sake of it would risk even Doris's anger. But——" She hesitates nervously, and looks at him again with brows uplifted and forlorn. "But would it be kind of me? She said to me, just before we came, that I was not to make myself remarkable with anybody, because people are always unkind, and might say I was—was flirting. They might say"—innocently—"I was flirting with you, perhaps."

"No," says Burke, frowningly; then his mood changes, and the most grievous dejection takes the place of his short-lived anger. "If they did, it would not be true,

would it?" he says, closing his fingers over hers, and gazing at her as if he would read her very soul.

"Dear Gerald, what a question!" A wistful expression desolates her lovely eyes. She sighs, and turns a little away from him. "Must you ask me that?" she says, reproachfully. "Oh, no! do not think it! But why make Doris unhappy? Should I not give up even the greatest joy I know to save her a moment's uneasiness?"

"You are an angel," says Burke, with emotion.

"I'm not. I haven't any wings," replies she, childishly shaking her pretty head until all her short loose yellow curls seem to laugh with her.

"I think you are. See how good you are to that old man, Sir Watkyn Wylde. Who would listen to his twaddle so sweetly as you?"

"He is very good to me," says Vera, opening her large eyes to their fullest, and trifling absently with her fan.

"That, of course. But your manner to him"—with loving appreciation of its gentleness—"is the prettiest thing I ever saw. It is more than kind of you."

"What is?" asks Vera, vaguely.

"To spend so much time humoring the vagaries of an uninteresting old man."

"Is he so old?"

"Can't you see it?"—laughing.

"No," says Vera. As she says it she laughs, however, but more as one might through sympathy with the mirth of another than from any appreciation of the joke itself.

Some people entering the room at this moment, Burke rises and gives his arm to Vera. "The balcony is cooler than this," he says to her, in a low tone, leading her thither.

As they step on to it, both, looking back, see Doris in the door-way beyond, talking to Lord Frederick Grayle.

"How very pretty your sister is looking to-night!" says Burke, involuntarily.

"I always think it is saying so little to say Doris is pretty," says Vera. "To my mind she is as beautiful in form as she is at heart; and what more can be said?"

Surprised by a sort of passion in her tone hitherto unheard, Burke glances at her hastily. Her eyes are fixed upon Lady Clontarf, who, calm and stately in the distant door-way, is listening with polite interest to the usual complainings about the non-payment of rents. Vera's face is full of a wondering tenderness. It occurs to the young man watching her that whether she be "bond or free" to Cupid, there lies within her a depth of love for this elder sister that few other affections could equal.

They are standing out in the light now, with the gardens below them, and the roaring of the distant ocean

sounding sadly in their ears. Undaunted by its greater majesty, a little stream near by croons loudly as it tumbles over its rocks and stones. Above them the "wandering moon" is sitting in silent state, with all her twinkling satellites around her. A baby wind, sweet with cool delights, is rushing gayly hither and thither, now revelling in the tremulous greetings of the leafy shrubs, now playing amorously with the riotous yellow locks on Vera's dainty head.

Burke, with his dark melancholy eyes fastened upon her face, is blind to the beauty of all around him. Of late one great overmastering passion has filled his soul to the exclusion of all lesser emotions. To this childish thing standing beside him he has given himself with a terrible absoluteness, to have and to hold at her good pleasure.

> "To his eye
> There is but one beloved face on earth."

She is his very life, his best beloved, his all! Into the little hands now resting clasped before her in a pretty languorous attitude, he has given the richest treasures of his heart, to be expended how? All the intense passion of which his passionate nature is capable is hers, to do with as she will:

> "She was his life,
> The ocean to the river of his thoughts,
> Which terminated all."

And, yet, does she love him? This is the thought that at times paralyzes all his hopes. The intensity of his affection is in a direct ratio to the intensity of his doubt. She smiles upon him; there is no reason why he should believe her anything but happy when alone with her; as now, her fingers have lain in his, and shown no desire for freedom, many a time and oft, and yet "the old, old pain of earth" is tormenting him now: so keen is its torture that involuntarily he stretches out his hands to her, as though beseeching grace.

"My darling," he says, brokenly, "make me sure; give me life."

"Of what shall I make you sure?" asks she, with a smile that makes all her white teeth gleam in the moonlight. The tender glow that a moment since had beautified her face as she looked at Doris is gone. She is now again the seemingly thoughtless, lovable, mirthful child.

"Of your love," says he, with a touching earnestness.

"In truth, I do not think I know what love means," returns she, with an enchanting little grimace. "What is it, then, this love? A fever?—an unrest? So they tell

me, those unfortunates who have given in to it. But I feel no fever. At night I sleep like a very dormouse. No: ask me something else."

"There is nothing else. Your love is my all. The lesser things have fallen from me. I have only my choice of life or death."

"One would think you were on your trial for murder," says Vera, idly. "Is my glove a 'lesser thing'? If so, I am afraid I shouldn't dare ask you to button this top button for me. But it *will* come undone."

She has drawn quite close to him, and has laid her bare arm within his hand to get the glove arranged. She is smiling up into his face with a witchery all her own. His hand tightens on the snowy flesh.

"Vera, answer me," he says, in a low tone that vibrates with emotion.

The small room outside is now deserted: they are virtually alone beneath the silent stars.

"What am I to say?"

"Say at least that I am more to you than any one else."

"I don't know how much you are to any one else." There is nothing in her gently puzzled face to show whether she has wilfully misunderstood him, or whether her mistake is genuine.

"Are other men less to you than I am?" asks Burke, steadily.

"Oh, that!" she says. Then she laughs. "What a silly question! But you are very silly, you know: you are almost as silly as I am."

"That is no answer."

"No! Isn't it? Well, yes, then; of course you are more to me than other men. No one is so kind as you. But then"—thoughtfully—"I know so few. Sir Watkyn might be; but he is so old. It isn't good to be old, is it?"

"Give me proof that you like me best."

"Proof!" She shakes her head, and looks vaguely all round her, as if seeking for inspiration to satisfy this difficult demand. Then at last her eyes come back to his. "Will this do?" she says, softly. "You may kiss my hand!"

She holds out to him one of those pretty members as she says this, drawing herself, however, a little away from him as she does so.

With quick delight he stoops his head, and kisses only the little hand he holds, but the soft [illegible] above the glove. A hundred times he kisses it [illegible] seems to have enough.

Laying her other hand upon his head [illegible] him gently back from her.

"Don't eat me," she says, in a soft, coquettish whisper. "I have given my proof: are you not satisfied?"

"No,"—boldly. "Many a one—that simpering old idiot inside, Sir Watkyn—might dare to kiss your hand; I would be more blessed than they. Darling, until you tell me you love me I cannot be happy."

"Be happy, then. I do love you," says Vera, calmly. "Why should I not? Are you not my friend?"

"Not that! Your lover! Friendship is a word too poor for the expression of my thoughts towards you. My beloved! my sweet sweetheart! what language could convey to you the full meaning of the love that burns within me for you?"—drawing her nearer to him, and trying vainly to read her charming ingenuous face,—"you will learn to love me in return, will you not?"

"I love you now. Have I not said it?" she murmurs, equably. "And you are my friend, no matter what you say. That is what I feel you are to me; that is what I feel I am to you." There is perhaps the faintest possible stress upon the latter assertion. "But we have been here a long time, have we not? Come," slipping her fingers with childish grace into his,—"take me back to—Doris."

The first slow bars of a square dance are coming to them slowly through the open window.

"Not yet," says Gerald, detaining her. "Grant me one little moment yet, before I resign you to those within. Vera, do not leave me thus coldly. I have laid bare my very soul to you: does that count for nothing?"

With a movement as gentle as it is tender, he suddenly takes her into the warm shelter of his arms and holds her fondly to his beating heart.

"Some day I know I shall win you," he says, glad certainty in his voice. "Say you think so too."

"At your command?" asks she, with a pretty archness. She whispe[illegible] question softly, slowly, with her face dangerous[illegible] his. Her voice is at all times full of music, lo[illegible]ng; but now there is a suspicion of tenderne[illegible] enhances its charm a hundredfold. We are t[illegible]

[illegible] not, in all his quiver's choice,
[illegible] like a sweet voice."

[illegible]h subtle poison. "At [illegible]eing he does not an-
[illegible]her words when sifted

[illegible] he, feeling a strange
[illegible]ver so priceless a pos-

"Very well; then I say, 'I think so too,'" murmurs she, playfully. "And now—come."

"Before you go, Vera, kiss me once," says Burke, detaining her by ever so slight an effort, and growing deadly pale beneath the tell-tale rays of the moon.

For a moment she hesitates; then, carried away perhaps by the eloquence of his look and tone, she yields.

"If it will make you happier, my friend," she says, tranquilly.

"Happier!"

Lifting her arms, he lays them round his neck, and then he kisses her. Perhaps his heaven is then! Who can tell? It is at least, I think, the nearest approach to it he ever knows.

And yet what is it, after all, this trivial action, that has suddenly transmitted his spirit to the glorious heights of Olympus? "What's in a kiss?" asks some old writer. "Really, when people come to reflect upon the matter calmly, what can they see in a kiss? Millions upon millions of souls have been made happy, while millions upon millions have been plunged into misery and despair, by this kissing; and yet, when you come to look at the character of the thing, it is simply a pouting and parting of the lips!"

Alas! alas! I think if the misery and happiness caused by "this kissing" were placed in the balance, the misery would weigh right down to earth, whilst the happiness would mount beyond our ken, so light 'twould be!

"Vera! you can never forget this," says he, still very pale, just before they return once more to the glitter and stir within.

"Forget it! why should I?" asks she, with a serenity utterly unruffled. "I shall like to remember it. Now I am sure you are very fond of me. When Doris loves me very much, she kisses me. I like to be loved."

The smile that accompanies this speech is positively divine. It lights up all her perfect face, that is like nothing so much as a just-awakened flower. "Ah! there is poor Sir Watkyn waiting for me," she says, and, smiling still, glides away from him, and, with her hand upon the old baronet's arm, disappears into the crowd.

A sense of isolation falls upon Burke as she vanishes from his gaze, and with it, too, a strange, strange sadness. Has he won? Does she know? Is she his as he is hers? or is it that she is as far from him now as she was yesterday and last week, or in that blank time when her baby face had never yet been seen by him? Then, with a thrill of passionate hope, he remembers she has kissed him!—has lain in his arms!—has in act, if not in word, confessed herself

his! She is such a child that perhaps she has found it difficult to speak aloud all that her heart would say, but happy time will wear away that most sweet and innocent reticence. He cannot doubt her truth; he *will* not! Those large and wistful eyes, of heaven's own blue, can hide no smallest touch of deceit; those mobile lips could frame no falsehood. To disbelieve in that smiling face, crowned by its soft rings of golden hair, would be to sneer at all that is best and holiest in life. It *must* be that she loves him! And yet——

The fiddling is still going on; the ball is at its height. Matrons are growing secretly sleepy, maidens are growing wary about catching the eyes of their elders, and skirt carefully round such spots as may hold drowsy mammas or heavy-lidded papas.

Doris—who has been dancing with a certain Colonel Bouverie, a whilom acquaintance of hers during her last season in town—has dropped into a low cushioned seat in one of the open windows. Her eyes are sparkling; a little color has crept into her cheeks; she is laughing at something her companion has just said to her, and is indeed a totally different Doris from the pale statuesque girl who had been receiving the guests some hours ago.

She is waving a huge fan indolently to and fro, in a fond endeavor to woo in-doors the light breeze without, whilst listening contentedly to her companion's chatter. Clontarf, who is leaning against the railings outside, being for the present moment off duty, wonders at her unusual animation.

"That big Guardsman ought to be presented with a gold medal," he says to himself, with a shrug: "he has actually persuaded her to smile."

"Well," says the "big Guardsman," ensconcing himself comfortably somewhere at her feet,—they are quite shaded from the inside of the room by curtains and a huge ottoman,—"you didn't think to see me here to-night, did you?"

"Indeed, no. You were a thorough surprise. I know it couldn't have been from the skies,—you are not ethereal enough for that; but where did you drop from?"

"You are very unkind; but I shall pass that over. I came from Fifeshire first, to some people of mine in Connemara; and then Lord Dundeady wrote to me about this affair, and I came here. I came to see you, you know."

"That of course," says Lady Clontarf, modestly. Then she tries to shift her position a little and looks at him. "Do you know something is making me very uncomfortable?" she says: "is it you? I feel as if you were sitting on my dress. Are you?"

"Really!"—innocently,—"I believe I am," shifting his position, too, but very slightly, and rather more to her than from her.

"Well! who would have thought it?" says Clontarf, who up to this has stood stricken to the earth by surprise. "If any fellow had told me she could—could positively—— Oh, hang it, you know! It seems, then, that I am the only one to whom she cannot talk."

Honor compelling him, he walks away—most unwillingly, be it said to his greater credit—until he is beyond earshot.

"How lovely Mrs. Montague Smythe is looking to-night!" says Doris, presently, alluding to a married beauty within, who always takes her walks abroad with at least a dozen admirers at her heels, and whose convenient husband is in Japan.

"Is she? I couldn't see any one but you. She's the woman with the queer eyes and the big mouth, isn't she? Clontarf's old flame, I mean." There is no premeditated malice in Bouverie's speech: it is merely idle. He is not in love with Doris, but the second nature he has acquired compels him to make laughing love to every pretty woman he meets. Indeed, what he has just now said barely touches Lady Clontarf's ears in passing, and affects her not at all.

"Was she so?" she says, smiling. "She is pretty enough to have been the old flame of many a one."

"She makes too much of it," says Bouverie, with a shrug. "A woman can have her little triumphs, but she needn't hang her scalps at her belt for all the world to see."

"You speak bitterly. Has she"—with an amused glance—"got your scalp?"

"Don't be hypocritical," says Bouverie, reproachfully. "You became the owner of that long since."

"Well, never mind: it has evidently grown again," says Doris, glancing expressively at the luxuriant crop of curly brown hair that graces the top of his head.

At this they both laugh aloud, and Clontarf, who has gone beyond reach of their words, but not of their laughter, grinds his teeth a little. Be a man never so indifferent to his wife, still he will object to another man's faintest admiration.

"So you have been at Connemara," says Doris, presently. "I wonder they didn't murder you, knowing you to be a hated Sassenach."

"They were too busy murdering their landlords.—And so you went to Cannes, that month my heart broke?"

"For quite a little time. Lord Clontarf wanted to get back to his shooting."

"Soulless being! In his place I should have forgotten there was such a thing as a partridge."

"Would you? After all, you are only a man. And what bluest lake or most golden sky could compare with a grouse or a partridge?"

"I shouldn't have wanted to stay because of the bluest lakes."

"For me, then? But, you see, you could bring me home with you, and have your grouse too."

"No, I couldn't," says Bouverie. "That is just what is wrecking my peace."

Here they both laugh again; and Clontarf, who won't go away, tells himself savagely that he can't stand much more of this.

"Where do you usually stay when in town?" asks Bouverie.

"I stayed at the Langham last time."

"And next time?"

"I think Lord Dundeady has a house in Portland Square, or somewhere."

"You will go over next year, of course?"

"How can I say? Do you know you are a very severe cross-examiner? You should have gone to the bar."

"No! Am I? That is not being well-mannered, is it? I must cure myself of that."

"You don't consider things. You say just what you like."

"Do I? Well, if only to carry out the character you give me, and prove you in the right, I shall tell you now that I think you are looking very lovely to-night."

"That is hardly a compliment. It suggests a doubt as to whether I was lovely yesterday, or whether I shall be so to-morrow. A transient loveliness is not to be desired: it carries disappointment in its train."

"I think you lovely always," says Bouverie, tenderly.

"I am tired of you: go away," says Doris, lightly. "That is your favorite waltz just begun, and no doubt some fair one is pining for you. Go; I want to sit here and rest myself for a little while in silence."

Thus dismissed, he goes; and Doris, leaning back in her seat within the curtains, gazes thoughtfully upon the sleeping gardens down below.

CHAPTER XII.

"I wiste not what was adversity
Till I could flee full high under the sky."

"Alas! what wonder is it, though she wept?"

CLONTARF, missing the drowsy hum of the two voices, glances quickly towards the open window where Doris sits, and sees even in this uncertain light that she is alone.

Shall he go and speak to her, and tell her what exquisite pleasure it has afforded him to see her so unlike herself to-night, so light and glad of heart? A moment's reflection, however, convincing him that sarcasm of this sort is not to be successfully delivered by men of his calibre, he determines on refraining from this style of oratory. But shall he speak to her nevertheless? He hasn't addressed her once all the evening. He has been then, beyond doubt, wanting in courtesy towards her.

Involuntarily he moves closer, until he finds himself standing just outside the open window, but hidden from her, partly by some heavy drooping creepers that hang in rank luxuriance from the walls, and partly by the fact of her head being turned directly away from him.

She seems so rapt in thought, to have so suddenly relapsed into all her old icy calm and impenetrable melancholy, that he hesitates about disturbing her.

His hesitation is still holding him silent, when two other voices break upon the air, and put an end forever to his half-formed design. They are close,—these voices,—directly inside the curtains, and soon claim his attention, and hers too. They are pretty, soft, low, feminine voices, pitched just now in the most approved key for gossiping-purposes. Evidently the owners of them have taken their positions on the ottoman already mentioned that helps to screen Doris's resting-place from those within, and are now preparing to carry on with an unctuousness that speaks for itself a conversation begun in some other cosey nook.

"I hear even her birth (putting aside altogether the fact of its being so deplorably low) isn't quite all it ought to be," says No. One, in a tone subdued, but rich in enjoyment.

"You mean," says No. Two, evidently leaning forward in hopeful anticipation of what is yet to come.

"That it lacked the sanction of the Church,—that there was, in fact, no ceremony."

"Ceremony?"

"Marriage ceremony!" somewhat impatiently. "They say that terrible old Costello forgot to take his wife to church."

"How absurd!" says No. Two, with an amused laugh, that suggests, as plainly as though they can see it, that the speaker is lifting her brows in deprecation of such a naughty matter, and is shrugging her dainty shoulders.

"It makes no difference to Lord Clontarf, however. The fortune is hers beyond a doubt. Self-made people, who don't know the meaning of property entailed, can always do justice in such cases. Clontarf took very good care to look to that, of course, before he married her."

With a badly-suppressed exclamation Clontarf comes suddenly forward, into the full light of the moon and his wife's eyes. She has sprung to her feet, and now stands before him, motionless as one stabbed to the heart. Her face is ghastly pale, her eyes dark with anguish. As their glances meet, he instinctively puts out his hand to her, but with a passionate gesture she repulses him, and, moving quickly by him, runs down the steps and disappears into the cold shadows below.

His first movement is to follow her, but he checks it, and with a heavy frown upon his forehead tears aside the lace curtains, and stands pale and stern before the horrified slanderers.

"Pardon me, madam," he says, addressing her who is nearest to him, "if I interrupt your conversation for one moment. Fortunately, I was near enough just now to hear what you were saying about my wife. I am sure"—with a bitter sneer—"it will give you inexpressible pleasure to know that whoever invented that false story of her birth—*lied!*"

Without waiting for rejoinder from either of the guests, who indeed have too thoroughly collapsed to be capable of it, he once more steps on to the balcony, and, with his veins tingling and his blood on fire from shame and pity, he rushes down the balcony steps in search of Doris.

At last he finds her. She is sitting on the marble edge of a fountain some distance from him, and is crying, not angrily or passionately, but with exceeding bitterness. As he draws nearer, grieved at heart for her, he can see the tears are running quickly down her cheeks through her clasped fingers, and that her attitude is heart-broken.

His coming step sounding upon her ear rouses her from her deep grief, and, rising with nervous haste, she makes a movement as though she would willingly escape; but, seeing it is too late to do it effectually, she changes her mind, and instead comes impulsively towards him.

"It is not true," she says, with vehement passion, but in

a low tone. "It was a lie! You must believe that. It can be proved——"

"Why will you speak to me like this?" says Clontarf, regretfully. "I want no proof. You spoke to me once of a possible friendship between us, but what has arisen instead? Almost an enmity, as it seems to me. Proof is unnecessary."

"It will be better," she says, still with great excitement. "I must have you satisfied on that point." She holds out her hands to him with a gesture of piteous appeal; her face is as pale as death; her eyes are full of a strange sad light; her lips are trembling. Suddenly—even as she looks at him—she breaks down. "It is not true, indeed, what those horrible women said!" she cries, in an anguish of shame, bursting into tears.

"I know it," says Clontarf, deeply moved. Taking one of her hands, he holds it fast. "I know"—very earnestly—"it was a most shameful lie. So foolish a one, too, as to be unworthy of comment. Why will you think of it?"

"It would be *too much* to bear!" exclaims she, brokenly, all her usual self-possession forsaking her in her need. With surprise, Clontarf sees the cold, proud woman change into a sad, imploring girl, and feels that she is sweeter for the change. He has forgotten how he felt half angry with her a few minutes since, because she had seemed happy and light of heart with Bouverie; or, if he remembers it, it is only with a pang of regret that he could ever have grudged this hurt and wounded spirit its small touch of gayety.

"You haven't got it to bear," he says, gently; "remember that. You are overwrought now, but to-morrow you will laugh at this folly. It is an ugly one, but still only a trifle after all."

"I cannot laugh at it," she says, releasing her hand from his, and pushing back the soft loose hair from her brow, with a little distracted air. "Everything is wretched, and miserable, and hopeless; but any doubt about—about *that*, would be horrible! You married me, knowing me to be of low origin. I"—proudly—"do not shrink from that thought; but anything more,—such as shame——" Again her voice fails her.

"Even if this story were true," says Clontarf, deliberately, "it could make no difference to me at all. You are now and forever my wife."

"Ah! true," murmurs she, with mournful meaning; and, almost as if speaking to herself and unconscious of his presence, she goes on. "The money would still be mine!" she says, in a low tone.

Her voice, her words, the drooping dejection of her head, all pierce him to his very soul. He is bitterly offended.

Turning away from her, he walks rapidly back to the house by the path by which he had come. But when a hundred yards lie between them, he stops short, hesitates, and finally returns to her.

She is evidently glad of his return, because she looks up as he gains her side, and, unsolicited, holds out to him the hand she had somewhat ungraciously withdrawn from his, a while ago.

"That cursed money!" he says, with some agitation. "It has been our undoing."

"It has indeed," returns she, almost inaudibly, with lowered eyes.

"I wish——" begins he, impulsively, and then grows silent.

"That we had never met?"

"No; but that we had met under other circumstances," replies he, slowly.

A swift wave of color sweeps over her face. She draws her breath quickly, and looks as if she would willingly have spoken, but is—because of a long-formed resolution—mute. Then she sighs, and throws up her head hurriedly, as one might if determinedly putting from one a forbidden hope. Her eyes are dry now, but her face is sadder than before. Clontarf, seeing this, comes to a wrong conclusion.

"I hope you are not going to distress yourself any further about that absurd bit of vulgar gossip," he says, kindly.

In the deeper thought that had sprung to life beneath his last words, she had for the moment forgotten the cruel slander to which she had been an unwilling listener. But now it returns to her with a pang of sharp pain.

"All the world, perhaps, believes it, or will believe it," she says, nervously.

"No one can believe it. It is the simplest thing in the world to ascertain."

"Those two women believe it."

"No; not now. I went to them. I told them—— Well, I believe—I can assure you that they will never even hint at it again."

"You!—you went to them!—*you* took my part!" says Doris, going nearer to him, and looking at him with profound surprise. Presently her eyes fill with tears. There is the most intense gratitude in every line of the beautiful countenance uplifted to his in the moonlight.

That she is beautiful occurs to Clontarf at this moment as a revelation. The delicate oval of her face, its pure expression, the quivering earnest lips, the large sad eyes, all cry aloud to him for admiration. It is a most fair face at any time, but fairer now than he has ever seen it,—now

"When that cloud of pride, which oft doth dark
Her goodly light,"

has been snatched from her by her sorrow and her tears.

The moonbeams, pale and languid (the dawn is close at hand), are lying sleepily upon the pale-green ground of her satin gown and are losing themselves amidst the tiny meshes of her lace. Her perfect arms, rounded and dimpled as a child's, are naked to the shoulder, and hang before her in a careless abandonment; her fingers are interlaced; her slight but *posée* figure is drawn up to its fullest height. Her eyes are fixed on his.

"It was nothing," he says, hurriedly, answering more her glance than her words. "Could I hear you so grossly maligned, and stand by silent? Surely it was my right to speak. You are"—he colors slightly—"my wife."

"Ah! that is true," she says, her low *traînante* voice sounding somewhat desolate. "It would have been a terrible thing for you to have let such a lie stand."

That she is a little unfair to him, he cannot but see. He cannot, too, however, fail to notice the curious lack of self-appreciation she betrays in everything she says. He curbs a certain sense of injury that threatens to rise within him, and says, quietly,—

"I wish you would try to think a little less harshly of me, as being not quite the selfish beast you have described. When I confronted those two women a while since, believe me—*I implore you*," exclaims he, with sudden vehemence, "to believe me—that I thought not at all of myself, but only of you. I had seen your face as you passed me down the steps. I should have been less than a man if I had not gone forward to make your story right."

There is a long pause, during which, as though fascinated, they regard each other steadily. Then,—

"Thank you. It was very kind of you," says Doris, faintly. And then again, "Alas! alas!" she says, sharply, and covers her face with her hands. Whatever melancholy thought has drawn forth these sighs, she keeps from him. No other words escape her.

A great longing to take the slender lissome figure in his arms—to soothe and caress her into a forgetfulness of her sorrow—is filling Clontarf's breast. She is his,—his own; no one on earth has so powerful a claim to her as he has; yet now he dares not touch her. To the commonest acquaintance, if in distress, he could show more open, more demonstrative, sympathy than he can to her. There is no lover-like or sentimental thought in his desire to comfort her; only the natural longing of the strong to succor the weak. Yet, almost unknown to him, there creeps into his heart the thought that there would be a sweetness too in

pressing one's lips to the white soft arms on which his eyes are resting.

"Do not take this silly matter so much to heart," he says, believing her agitation arises still from what had happened on the balcony. "It makes me"—awkwardly, but anxiously—"so unhappy to see you cry."

"I am not crying," says Doris, letting her hands fall from her face. Indeed, her thoughts had lain "too deep for tears." "I was merely thinking."

"Of what?"

"Of what is past recall," she says, slowly; then, as though fearful he may question her, "I was thinking of many things," she goes on, hurriedly. "I was wondering what I had done, that—that any one should seek so cruelly to injure me as to invent the falsehood we overheard."

"'The women pardoned all except her face,'" quotes Clontarf, lightly.

A faint smile crosses her lips. "Come, let us go in," she says; and, gathering up her train with a graceful backward motion, she moves towards the house.

Clontarf follows her up the balcony steps, but not into the room beyond. Leaning over the railings outside, he glances down to where the ocean is sleeping peacefully in the bay, and where the first faint flush of coming dawn is rising from behind the purple hills.

"Flaky darkness breaks within the east," and a cold, sad breeze, coming upward from the valley, blows across his face. It is the "first low fluttering breath of waking day" that "stirs the wide air:" timorously it comes, as though afraid to issue forth in all its strength until the hours have lent it courage. Heedless of it, Clontarf still leans over the railings, and repeats to himself over and over again a little phrase that has imprinted itself upon his brain,—"Of what is past recall!" He can see again her face as she said it,—the sad mouth, the sadder eyes. Yes, her marriage had been a fatal mistake, no doubt, and now she is beginning to find it out. Well, it was as much her fault as his. But was it? He, the man, should have been the one to show her her folly, to warn her that an empty title could never be an equivalent to love. Instead of that, as it now seems to him, he had kept silence, and by doing so had actually *profited* by her girlish ignorance. He grows crimson with a sort of intolerable shame as this thought grows upon him. Then by a passionate effort he rouses himself and flings it from him. He had not done this base thing. He had believed her cold and hard and unfeeling, one with whom worldly distinction would ever rank as the chief good. To-night has undeceived him; but surely it is not his fault that knowledge has come too late.

And why to-night, of all nights, has she let the garb of pride fall from her? That silly bit of scandal could have hardly possessed the power to do away so completely with the self-control of years, unless—— How happy, how unlike herself (as he has hitherto known her), she had seemed with Bouverie! Perhaps——

A dangerous light comes into his blue Irish eyes; he grinds some stray pebbles savagely beneath his heel, and, turning, enters the ball-room with an abrupt step and a head haughty and erect.

The ball-room has grown thin during his absence. Most of the guests are gone, or going. Making his way to the hall, he finds the Coole people leaving, and Doris talking earnestly to Mrs. Desmond. She—Doris—is also cloaked and hooded, ready for departure, and seems to have recovered her distress. Colonel Bouverie is standing close to her.

Kit, looking as fresh and radiant as in that first hour when she entered the Castle (oh, the glad charms of our youth!), is standing a little apart from the others with Neil Brabazon, waiting for the signal to go, and is listening to, and whispering in return, those honeyed nothings so dear to lovers' hearts.

"Now, remember, I shall expect you all to-morrow," Doris is saying, gayly. "I shall want to talk to somebody about to-night: so don't disappoint me. And you, Mr. Brabazon,"—turning with a swift, sweet smile of sympathy to Neil,—"you will come too, will you not? When one has been up all night, a long ride is so refreshing."

"Thank you," says Brabazon, answering the kindly smile with another full of gratitude. How good it is of her to give him this last chance of another afternoon with the "ladye of his love!"

CHAPTER XIII.

"And keep you from the wicked remembrance
Of Malebouche and all his cruelty."

"WELL," snarls Mrs. Costello from her lounging-chair beside the fire, "you haven't told me yet who was silly enough to accept that old spendthrift's invitation last night. But I suppose I am to be kept in the dark about that as well as about everything else,—hey?"

It is next day, and rather far into it; indeed, the tiny clock upon the chimney-piece in the small drawing-room

at Kilmalooda is on the stroke of four, and Lady Clontarf and her aunt are seated nearly opposite to it, awaiting the arrival of their visitors.

Vera is still in her room, but Mrs. Costello, who, as a general and most grateful rule to the rest of the household, generally sinks into retirement when guests are expected, has to-day signified her intention of helping her niece to receive them. She is in an abominable temper and a cap that would go far towards the unsettling of any one's reason, and looks fatally warlike as she sits snorting defiance at the fire.

"Every one was there, I think," says Doris, in answer to her question, wisely letting her accusing hint go by.

"What d'ye mean by that?—hey? *Every* one! Was her most gracious majesty there (gracious, indeed,—pah!) and all the royal family?"

"Almost everybody we know," says Doris, with the gentlest disregard of her humor.

"Then everybody we know is a fool. Who paid for the supper, I wonder? Goodness help the confiding idiots who sent it, or the band either! The Desmonds were there, of course. That silly woman wouldn't exist unless she was showing off her last new gown. Was Mrs. Montague Smythe there?"

"Yes,—and looked so charming."

"Ay, I know her sort. All paint and powder. A little honest soap and water would so change her doll's face that none of her lovers would know her. Pshaw! However, every man to his taste, and, if *she* was there, Clontarf was happy."

"Is Mrs. Montague Smythe so necessary to his happiness?" asks Doris, coldly. Though scarcely annoyed, still at this moment the few careless words dropped by Colonel Bouverie last night recur to her as freshly as if only just spoken. "What do you know of her?" she says, asking her second question with half-closed lids and supercilious lips. She has a large black fan in her hand to defend herself from the fire, and is waving it indolently to and fro.

"More than I shall say," says the old dame, with irritation, the girl's calm but haughty face rousing into even more active life the evil spirit within her. "You think"—venomously—"that because you shut me up, to keep me from contaminating your friends (as though I were a plague-spot), I can hear nothing? that my eyes are blind? But I tell you, no! I can hear, ay, and see, better than most."

"Is that just, aunt? Is it true? Who would shut you up? Is it I—or—or—Donat?"

"Hark! How she stammers over his name! Her deep

love makes her timid," mutters the terrible old woman, nibbling her nails. But Doris, though she turns deadly pale at this thrust, takes no heed.

"Have we not many a time entreated you to join us down-stairs?" she says, gently.

"Ay! Hypocrites all! But I can read you!" shaking her withered hand at Doris. "You keep me here, thinking to get my money at my death; but not a penny—not a penny, I tell you—will come to you or yours. Like a dog I'm treated, and by her"—appealing to the ceiling or the curtain-poles—"whose battle I fought, unsupported, with that vile old man, with his lisp and his dyed head." Here she falls a-whimpering.

"How can you talk to me like that?" says Doris, soothingly. "Could I not have separated myself from you at my marriage if I had so willed? But you have not yet answered my question."

"I shall answer no questions."

"I must ask you again, nevertheless, for an answer to your insinuation about Donat," says Doris, with dignity. "You mentioned his name a moment since in connection with that of Mrs. Montague Smythe's—Why?"

"Why? Because he was in love with her before ever he heard of your fortune, and is so still. That's why."

"Who could have told you this infamous story?" says Doris, turning a white, still face to her tormentor.

"None of your precious friends, at all events. I can hear nothing from them, as I am accounted unworthy to sit in their presence. But I have other sources. Ay, ay, I know how the world wags, though I never quit my own four walls."

"What servant in my house has dared to gossip with you about her master?" asks Doris, in a low tone, but with eyes alight with passion.

"Hey! but we can be jealous," says Mrs. Costello, with a sneer, "and all for one who never cares to bestow upon us a second glance. Fie, then, girl! where is your vaunted pride, that sprung from—*the mire!* Ha! ha! No. I shall not betray my informant, though it be the fashion in our land nowadays to turn 'approver.'" She smiles grimly. "I shall tell you nothing. Ask him about this 'infamous story:' no doubt he will tell you all the truth."

"I am sure of that," says Doris, curbing her temper by a supreme effort. "Yes, I shall ask him."

At this, and at the girl's magnificent self-control, the old woman cowers a little, and glances at her uneasily. In her soul she has never believed one word of the scandalous tale she has just uttered, but the malignity of her dis-

torted nature has compelled her to give voice to it for the discomfiture of her who—strange, sad contradiction though it seem—is the one dear thing to her in all the world.

"Don't do that," she says, surlily, but in a beaten tone, fearing further mischief from the repetition of her vulgar slander. "'Let sleeping dogs lie:' it is sound advice."

"No. I shall ask him about it," says Doris, dreamily, but with determination.

At this moment the door is thrown open; there is a sound of soft voices and musical laughter, and the people from Coole are ushered in. They are followed by Brabazon, he having arrived almost as they did, to Mr. Manner-ing's intense disgust, who had hoped and believed him to be fourteen miles away to-day, and has been luxuriating in the thought that he will be many hundreds away to-morrow.

Two minutes later, Clontarf and Burke join them; and then, almost immediately after, there comes Vera, alone.

She says "How d'ye do?" to everybody with a soft warmth and the sweetest little smile in the world. Stooping over Doris, she kisses her.

"I haven't seen you to-day until now, have I, Dody?" she says. "I've been so lazy. And what a delicious tea-gown you have on, darling! It suits you,—oh, quite! Quite *altogether!* Doesn't it, Mrs. Desmond?"

"It is the very prettiest thing," says Monica, who has indeed been in silent raptures over it since her arrival.

"But where is it when compared with Mrs. Montague Smythe's get-up last night?" asks Dicky Browne. "Echo answers, Nowhere! Give me a mustard-colored gown for a general all-round effect."

As the name, now growing so hatefully familiar to her, crosses Dicky's lips, Doris instinctively glances at her husband.

"I thought it was rather a handsome dress, but peculiar," he says, indifferently.

"Humph! Handsome is as handsome does," growls Mrs. Costello from her corner, in an angry aside.

"Quite so. That is a very noble sentiment. I agree with Mrs. Costello: I always do," says Mr. Browne, sweetly. "She means that probably Mrs. Smythe did nothing handsome last night, and therefore her gown's claim to beauty is *nil.*"

"Clontarf, you ought to speak up for the absent Venus," says Desmond; "she acted very handsomely by you last night, at all events. She gave you three whole dances all to yourself, whilst other fellows were deeply grateful if they got a bit of one."

Some word that sounds like "scorpion" is hissed by Mrs.

Costello to the fire; but every one is afraid to ask her what it was she really said.

"She was very kind to me indeed," says Clontarf, easily. "She looked very pretty too, I thought. Didn't you?"—addressing Doris, whose large eyes are fixed upon him curiously.

"I thought her perfectly lovely. I never saw her until last night," replies she, slowly.

"She is disimproved. She used to be more natural. She has adopted the æsthetic school of thought, and it doesn't suit her," says Clontarf.

"I wish she would 'yearn' over me," says Dicky Browne. "I'm as good as a tiger-lily or a daffadowndilly, any day."

"Much better. You are a Philistine, and open to conversion," says Kit. "Fancy the joy of bringing you down to one meal a day, and that off the contemplation of a dying thistle."

"I don't care about fancying it at all," says Mr. Browne. "I suppose it's a charming idea, but I confess I don't see it."

"Perhaps she will spare you, Dicky," says Brabazon. "After all, I think Lady Kilnear is more really beautiful than Mrs. Smythe."

"'I know not which is sweeter,—no, not I,'" quotes Desmond, with a faint yawn. "I suppose one of them must be: let us then say, as it is safer to join the majority, Mrs. Smythe."

"There is something so unreal about her," still objects Brabazon.

"She blackens her eyelids," says Vera, suddenly. It is the first word she has uttered since the idle discussion began, and she says it very distinctly. Every one looks at the little innocent thing in the white cashmere frock who has made this startling remark, and the little innocent thing looks back at them with undisturbed serenity.

"She blackens them very much,—*too* much," she says, evenly. "I think it is that Egyptian stuff she uses: it is the best. You may cry as much as ever you like, and it won't come off!"

Dead silence follows her little speech: she looks so like a child but only yesterday emancipated from the nursery, that this assumption of worldly knowledge sits upon her with a strangeness that is ludicrous.

Clontarf bursts out laughing.

"What an absurd child you are!" he says.

"Am I?" says Vera, smiling too.

"Dearest, what can you know about such things?" says Doris, rather troubled. Vera's cigarettes have been a burden to her sometimes, but this—this is worse.

"I could see it," says Vera, shrugging her soft shoulders: "couldn't you?"

"But your seeing it suggests the idea that—that you must have seen it before," says Doris.

"Well, so I did,—often," says Vera, with the gayest little laugh imaginable. "You put it on with a tiny brush,—so," rubbing the tip of one slender finger across her lashes. "The countess showed me how to do it; but it didn't become me."

"Oh, Vera!" says poor Doris; but every one is laughing by this time: so awkwardness is at an end, and finally Doris laughs too.

"I am certain Miss Costello is right," says Brabazon. "I said there was something unreal about Mrs. Smythe."

"'Man, to man so oft unjust, is always so to woman,'" says Mrs. Costello, with a sneer. Though secretly glad to hear the beauty reviled, she cannot refrain from a slap at the reviler.

"Quite true," says Dicky Browne, with a sympathetic glance at Mrs. Costello, meant to convey to her how deeply he deplores Brabazon's scurrilous tendencies. That good woman, catching the glance, is so enraptured with it that she instantly makes a violent (if surreptitious) blow at him with her stick. This mark of her favor, however, unfortunately falls short of its mark, owing to a timely dodge on the part of Mr. Browne.

"She's in her most charming mood to-day," he says, totally unabashed, to Kit, who has been a delighted spectator of this little by-play. "She's excelling herself. I had no idea she was so full of fun. Had you?"

"No," says Kit, who is quite pink with suppressed laughter. "But it is impossible to know any one. I have been equally taken in by you. The clever way you avoided that stick convinces me your proper line of business is pantomime: you would make *such* a harlequin!"

"I'll think of it," says Dicky, as though rather agreeably struck by the suggestion than otherwise. "But what an aim she has got, and what an eye! And, at her age, what astonishing vigor! Another moment, and my brains would have been on the hearth-rug! She certainly is *very* playful!"

"I don't think they would have done the hearth-rug much harm," says Miss Beresford, alluding to his brains. "They would probably have passed unnoticed." With this she very wisely beats a retreat to where the others are still warmly debating the merits and demerits of the past evening.

"Well, I know *I* had quite a lovely time, at all events," she says, gayly.

"So we could see for ourselves," says Brian, in a low voice, meant for her ear alone. "'Love and a cough,' say the Spaniards, 'cannot be hidden.' Your—cough—betrayed you."

"Oh, Brian!" whispers she, in return, blushing "celestial rosy red, love's proper hue," and glad in her heart because of his words. Do they not in some mysterious manner make her feel that at least she has her brother-in-law on her side and on Neil's?

"Where is your ancient Crœsus?" asks Dicky Browne, finding himself close to Vera.

"Who?" asks she, with prettiest vagueness, a little expectant smile upon her lips.

"Why, Sir Watkyn."

"Oh! Sir Watkyn! Oh, yes! I didn't know a bit what you meant. Isn't he nice? Isn't he sweet!"—a gleam of childish enthusiasm lighting up her lovely eyes.

For once Mr. Browne finds himself without a word. To describe him in his own elegant phraseology, he feels himself at this moment "distinctly staggered." Does she mean it? Can she? Is she very young, or very stupid, or very—the other thing?

"*Very* nice, particularly sweet," he says, at last, with a gravity worthy of imitation.

"But why did you say ancient?" asks Vera, running a ring idly up and down her third finger. "He is not so altogether old, is he?"

"By no means. No man is altogether anything. There are always extenuating circumstances. Some old men have young hearts, some—young clothes. Sir Watkyn's clothes are positively juvenile. Therefore he can't be 'altogether old.' His coat redeems him, not to mention the—er—other things, which are absolutely in their infancy. I dare say he will come to the bib and tucker style in time. Tell you a capital name for him: 'The Ancient and Modern,'—eh? He comprises both, like the Hymns."

"A charming name," says Vera, merrily. "Why, here he comes! Shall we ask him how he likes it?"

She makes a step forward.

"Oh, no!" entreats Dicky, in an imploring tone, following her. "He—he mightn't see the joke, you know."

"Yes, he will: he's sure to. No one could fail to see it," says Vera, pleasantly. Then she escapes from him, and goes straight up to Sir Watkyn (who has shambled into the room), with the evident determination of laying before him Mr. Browne's small joke, leaving the latter rooted to the spot, with the cold sweat of horror upon his brow.

Now she has reached the old beau, and has laid her hand in playful fashion upon his arm.

"Sir Watkyn," she says, in a clear sweet voice that rings through the room,—whereupon Dicky sends up an urgent prayer that the ground may open beneath his feet and swallow him up. Another moment, and—

"Sir Watkyn, what penalty shall we inflict upon you for depriving us so long of your society?" says Vera, with a saucy smile darted into the old man's eyes.

Dicky, with a sigh of relief, falls backward and sinks into a chair. No, she will not betray him this time. "But it was a near shave," mutters he to himself, with all due solemnity. He is indeed so thoroughly overcome by the nearness of his "shave" that he does not hear the door open or the announcement of Lord Dundeady's arrival.

The marquis has indeed just crossed the threshold, with a face as long as your arm.

"What a grave face, my lord!" says Clontarf, jestingly, going up to him.

"Ah! how good of you to come!" says Doris, with a little flush of pleasure, laying her fingers softly upon his arm. "I hardly hoped you would."

"Nay, my dear, I am always glad to find myself where you are," says the marquis, with an old-fashioned gallantry that savors of new-born affection: indeed, a strange deep liking, that verges upon something warmer, has arisen between Doris and this worldly old man.

"Bad news, Donat," he says, turning to his son, while still holding Doris's hand. "Nothing can be worse. The Moonlighters have been at it again. I have been with Madam O'Connor, and it is only too true that her steward was last night most brutally murdered."

"Not Sullivan?" asks Doris, faintly.

"Yes,—Sullivan."

"And last night!" says Monica, turning very pale. "Last night, whilst we were dancing! Oh, it is horrible!"

"It is scandalous!" says Donat, vehemently. "The sin of this and all other agrarian murders be on the soul of that man who has dared to undertake the governance of our land without understanding it!"

"We have indeed fallen upon evil days," says Lord Dundeady.

"Ay, croaker, bird of ill omen!" calls out a harsh strident voice from the chimney-corner. The words proceed from Mrs. Costello, but, as Mr. Burke and Brian are providentially seized with a severe fit of coughing as they are uttered, they go unheard—

By all but Mr. Browne. He, having by this time quite recovered from his late shock, is now once again ready for action. Finding himself in a position open to Mrs. Costello's view, he raises his brows and his hands, and, by

many ghastly pantomimic contortions of his features, gives her to understand that her opinion is his, upon this as upon all other matters.

Worthy as his amiable advances doubtless are, they are treated by Mrs. Costello with silent contempt. This may be accounted for in two ways: one, that he has taken up his stand at a prudent distance from the all-powerful stick; the other, that her eyes are fixed unblinkingly upon the unconscious marquis.

"There will be a most frightful case of assault and battery here in about two minutes," says Mr. Browne, in a low tone, to Brian Desmond. "Look at her,"—stealthily indicating Mrs. Costello: "there is malice in her very nose."

"There is color, anyhow," says Brian. "It couldn't be much redder if it tried. I shouldn't wonder if it burst into a blaze."

"All of her will do that shortly, you mark my words," says Dicky. "In two minutes she will have either apoplexy or the marquis; and I wouldn't mind laying odds it is the marquis. Shouldn't he be warned or forcibly removed,—eh? I think I shall go away. To be called as a witness in this case would be most repugnant to my feelings; and, besides, the sight of a mangled corse does not afford me the unlimited satisfaction it does others."

"It was the most uncalled-for murder," the marquis is saying, in a horrified tone. "But really they appear to me to have come to that pitch that they don't care who it is, so long as they are murdering somebody. They say we shall have a most iniquitous winter; and I believe it."

"It can't be worse than last."

"It can, in that it may come more immediately home to us. I get a good deal of private information from Moriarty,—my managing man, you know, Donat,—a very impossible person, who *will* wear hobnailed boots, though I have argued with him most ably on the matter, and with a voice like a railway-whistle. An excellent creature nevertheless, and——"

"Bah!" exclaims Mrs. Costello, loudly and unexpectedly, at this moment, giving way at last to a long-suppressed burst of hostility.

Apprehension of the direst description reduces every one to silence.

"I beg your pardon," murmurs the poor marquis (who perhaps hardly realizes the situation), in tones of the most courteous deference. "You were saying——"

"Bah!" repeats Mrs. Costello, even louder and with greater hostility than before.

"Ah! Quite so, quite so," says the marquis, hastily. He is too well seasoned to permit himself actual defeat, but

he saves his position only by a smile and a retreat. "Yes! really Moriarty is invaluable," he goes on, blandly, as though nothing at all out of the commonest run of good manners has taken place. "But his accounts of how things are going are very uncomfortable. Invaluable people are always uncomfortable, my dear Donat. They are a sort of moral medicine,—nasty, but indispensable. He assures me we shall have a most disturbed winter. He tells me, too," turning to Desmond, "that your uncle has been making himself rather unpopular of late. I was sorry to hear that."

"He has been doing only his duty," says Brian, with a shrug.

"Yes, yes, of course. But I think I should do a little less duty, or I should do it a little differently *just now*," says the marquis, cautiously withdrawing his glass from his right eye to squeeze it into his left.

"Oh, dad! What a sentiment!" says Donat, laying his hand on his father's shoulder and breaking into an amused laugh.

"I would preach moderation," says the marquis, looking leisurely around him. "These Irish peasants are capable of most unpleasant deeds. They are a rough people,—a desperate people,—a people who have not learned how to think. In fact," says the marquis, with a comprehensive wave of his hand, "they should never have *been!* They are a gigantic mistake!"

"What a comfort it is you can't reform the universe!" says Mrs. Costello, leaning forward to confront him, with a mocking smile. "If you had *your* way, you know, *you* would never have been; and what a loss that would be to us all! You are one of these 'desperate people,' aren't you? You are Irish, hey? No, Doris! I will not be silenced. I *will* speak," declares the old beldame, who is now in a humor to make life hideous to her neighbors. "He is abusing his own land, the craven! and I will not sit by and make no sign. I tell you, they are a kindly people, a loyal people, whose only fault is that they are too easily led by demagogues, who rouse evil passions in their impulsive breasts. This vile government has made them what they are, and yet that worthless woman Victoria will not rise to stay its hand."

"Dear me! bless me!" says the marquis, in a low voice. "What a flow of—er—strong language! Why, those Parnellite fellows would sink into nothingness beside her! She is a wonderful woman, certainly." Then, finding Doris is looking shocked and distressed, he laughs and pats her hand softly. "There is nothing becomes a beautiful face so well as a smile," he says. "I should like to see one on yours. I cannot find that there is any reason why

it should be without one. Tea?"—to Vera, who is holding out to him the daintiest little cup and saucer in the world, upon the daintiest palm. "No, thank you. It is one of my greatest trials that I am obliged to abstain from tea. But my nerves,—my nerves!"

He lifts his brows, and looks so tenderly regretful that all the women are quite sorry for him. Fancy being forbidden one's tea! Poor, poor man!

An ominous snort from the fireplace, however, convinces the terrified public that there is one woman, at all events, who has closed her heart to pity.

"You will come to the billiard-room before leaving?—I want to ask you a question or two," says Clontarf, hurriedly, with a view to checking a repetition of the snort,—with the further view also of supplying his father with a substitute for the tea, that, though stronger, has, oddly enough, never been known to affect his nervous system in any way.

"Certainly," says the marquis, amiably, seeing through the "question or two" in no time, and rather glad of the chance offered of getting away from his *bête noir* in the chimney-corner.

One by one, indeed, all the men melt into nothingness; even Dicky Browne—having eaten most of the sugar, and fought a free fight with Vera over the last piece of cake—disappears too.

"I am afraid the country is getting into a very disturbed state," says Doris, nervously. "And we used to pride ourselves on the fact of its being the quietest part of Ireland. This last murder is horrible. I suppose they have all gone" (meaning the men) "to talk it over in the billiard-room."

"I should think they have all gone to have a brandy and soda," says Vera, demurely, biting her cake with all the air of a decided little gourmande, as she is.

Perhaps she is right. But Doris is right too. A very grave discussion about the state of the country generally takes place in the billiard-room. So daring have the outrages become of late that no man feels his life to be his own, and not a morning dawns without bringing in its train fresh tidings of crimes committed overnight,—of cattle maimed and hay-ricks burned, of houses fired, of terrified women, and men, overpowered by numbers, being forced upon their bended knees, and under pain of death compelled to swear disloyal oaths and enroll their names upon the bloody scroll of murderers. To work for any man proscribed by the Land League means death, or a reduction to direst poverty by the destruction of the delinquent's miserable property,—meaning, in the case of a

laborer, his one pig, or his sheep, or perhaps only a few laying hens.

"Now, one last word, Brian," says the marquis, taking his foot off the step of his brougham as he is about to leave. He is very friendly with Desmond, having known him even a little longer than he has known his son. "Remember what I said about moderation, and repeat it to your uncle. I know even more of how things lie than I choose to say. It is the better part of valor to humor, or at least to pretend to humor, these wretched boors that surround us, until brighter days dawn."

"I fear they lie behind the horizon," says Donat, who is standing beside him.

"The whole thing is so absurd!" says the marquis, with his customary shrug. "A shilly-shallying government will never do for a hot-headed peasantry such as ours. What they want is a thorough acquaintance with the effects of a cavalry charge and the touch of cold steel. But, as we may not teach them that, why, moderation, my dear Brian, moderation is the word."

"I am afraid I shall find it difficult to convince The Desmond of that," says Brian. "I shall give him your message, my lord, nevertheless."

"Make him take it to heart," says the marquis, quite earnestly for him, "or he will be making us a present of Coole as a bonfire one of these dark nights. Tell him from me"—airily—"that, cold as the weather grows, I should object to warming my hands at such a fire as that."

"I hope you won't have the chance," says Brian, laughing. "Oh, I dare say we shall get off."

"I don't know. They expect so much, you see. It isn't master and man now; it is man and master. A very well-to-do tenant of mine, McCarthy, came to me the other day to tell me he could by no means produce his rent. 'I'm broke,' said he. 'Good heavens!' said I, 'how distressing! *Where?*' He was good enough to explain. 'All I want,' said he, 'is your consideration.' 'You shall have it,' said I, and instantly rang the bell for whiskey and water. 'All *I* want,' said I, 'is my rent.' I got it—after a while, you know; after a while. Yes, they require a great deal."

He sighs profoundly, smiles benignly upon the two young men, and, finally stepping into the brougham, is soon out of sight.

"*There* is a man who has got in all his rents, has steadily refused to make a single abatement, and is still on excellent terms with his tenantry," says Desmond, staring after the departing carriage with admiration in his eyes.

"The governor is certainly always all there," says Donat, nodding his head. "He is as clever as you like."

"It is getting late. I wonder if they have finished their gossip," says Brian, alluding presumably to his wife and her friends in the drawing-room.

"I'll go and see. Go on you to the billiard-room again," says Clontarf. "If they haven't, you may as well have another cigar with me before you go."

CHAPTER XIV.

"Lo! suchê sleightês and subtleties
In women be. For aye as busy as bees
Are they, us silly men for to deceive.

You love I best, and shall, and other none."

In the drawing-room it is now growing dusk, but the fire is so glad of heart that it is making the very walls of the room blush with the rosy warmth. Mrs. Costello, finding her "occupation o'er" with the departure of her foe the marquis, has taken herself off to the mystic recesses of her chamber and the companionship of her long-suffering maid.

Unutterably relieved by her welcome absence, the four girls (for, in spite of that most beautiful boy in the nursery at Coole, Monica in appearance may still be classed as one) are sitting chattering gayly over the fire.

All troubled thoughts seem to have slipped from the mind of Doris. She is sparkling with animation, and is entering into the discussion on hand with an *esprit* most admirable. She is half sitting, half lying on the hearth-rug, in a position full of careless grace, with her head against Monica's knee,—she is very fond of Monica,—and is altogether as unlike her usual calm, cold self as it would be possible to imagine.

"I think I never saw Gerald look so handsome as he did last night," she is saying. "His eyes were so dark, so full of that most blessed of all things,—hope. Generally, he looks too melancholy."

"Mr. Burke? Oh, he is delicious," says Vera, in her soft cooing voice, now rippling with laughter, as though over some irresistible recollection. "He takes life so altogether *au grand sérieux* that he turns it into a comedy for the rest of us! As the 'Giaour' or the 'Corsair,' his appearance alone would insure him a fortune on the stage."

"He may surely be considered in a more kindly light than that," says Lady Clontarf, some carefully-suppressed disappointment in her tone. "He is both earnest and re-

liable. When I look at him it always occurs to me how easy a thing it would be to learn to love him."

"Yes; he is very lovable," says Monica.

"Is he? One hardly knows. *I* don't," says Vera, lightly. "I don't think I shall know what love is at all,—at least that kind of love,"—shaking her lovely blonde head. "Do you, Dody?" This to Doris, who is looking somewhat thoughtful.

"I don't know, darling. I"—sadly—"hope so."

"Why, Dody, what a look! Are you an advocate of love? It must be a horrid thing, I think, because the very thought of it has made you grave."

A second later, as though some knowledge has come to her too late, she flushes crimson all through her perfect skin, and tears (unwonted indeed) spring to her eyes. Surreptitiously she leans forwards until her fingers can close upon a ribbon that adorns Doris's pretty gown. Having secured it, she holds it tightly, though why, she hardly knows; but all that evening, and ever afterwards, her manner towards her sister is tinged with a deeper tenderness.

"It should make no one grave," says Kit, with sudden warmth. "It should only make one happy. To love, to feel that one is loved in return, is life indeed."

"If one loves wisely," says Monica, making a feeble effort to support her cause.

At this Vera laughs irreverently.

"To love wisely is to love to order. Is that 'life indeed'?" she asks, artlessly. "After all, where lies the magic in this mighty love? 'Lookers-on,' say they, 'see most of the game.' I should think the knowledge gained by their eavesdropping would cure them effectually of ever playing at love! Lovers, as far as I can see, are the most miserable class of beings extant. Now, I ask you all, who is the most wretched-looking person you know?"

"Mr. Mannering, I think," says Doris, laughing, led to this answer by the remembrance of a conversation that took place last night between her and Vera.

"Ah! And I'm sure he is a victim to the untender passion," says Vera, lightly. Neither she nor Doris is aware of the unhappy man's predilection for Miss Beresford. "He is stupid enough for that or anything. And he can't dance; no, not a bit. How I hate a man who puts his name down on one's card and then knocks one to pieces! A mean take-in, I call it."

"He knows as much about waltzing as the man in the moon," says Kit, with keen appreciation of his demerits.

"He is quite too beyond everything," agrees Vera, with a dainty shrug.

"Poor man! Well, yes,—really, I think he is," says Doris, reluctantly, yet with a latent sense of amusement in her tone.

To Monica all this is terrible. She had said a sweet word or two for Mr. Burke a moment since to please Doris, yet now Doris has gone over to the enemy (albeit unwittingly) and has given her vote against Mr. Mannering. Are they all bent on knocking her pet scheme about her ears and reducing her Kit to poverty?

She sighs forlornly. Of course Doris does not understand how it is with her: she wishes now she had made her a partner in her design, and had let her see how essential it is to Kit to secure a *bon parti*, and how impossible it is she should be allowed to wed a man without a penny. She glances at Kit, and can see that she is revelling in the unanimous verdict returned against her English adorer, and that her face is wreathed in smiles. The whole scene is of course very palatable to *her*, an absolute feast of cakes and ale.

"It's his chin, I think," says Doris, breaking the momentary silence, and speaking in a tone of deep compassion. Monica cannot avoid knowing she is alluding to Mr. Mannering, who certainly does recede in that direction.

"No, it is not," says Kit.

"It is his legs," says Vera, solemnly; whereupon they all give way to laughter. Even Monica, after a short but decisive battle with her inclinations, gives way too, and laughs as merrily as the rest.

It is at this moment that Clontarf comes to the door, and a stand-still. The different sounds of merriment reach him, but one is clearer to him than all the rest. It is sweeter, more musical,—*stranger!* More by instinct than by knowledge, he knows it is his wife's laughter to which he is listening.

The room, except where the fire penetrates, is sunk in darkness; his tall form, standing in the door-way, is lost in shadow. Silently he stands and gazes on the group before him, or rather on its central figure. Doris is still stretched in a languid graceful fashion upon the rug, her head leaning against Monica. The bright flashes of light from the fire are playing among the gold-brown threads of her hair, and lighting up her pure and perfect profile. One hand is thrown negligently above her head, the other toys idly with a gigantic Japanese fan; and still, as he watches her, the low sweet laughter issues from her lips.

To others she can talk! With others she can laugh! To, and with, him alone she is ever the same,—an emotionless, if beautiful, statue. Anger, that is almost akin to hatred, rises in his heart as he watches her; and yet——

A great longing to hear her laugh in his presence makes him approach them somewhat abruptly; but as the light of the fire, falling upon him, reveals his tall figure, the mirth dies from her face, and with a soft exclamation she springs hastily to her feet.

To any ordinary woman of his acquaintance he would have said, "Don't let me disturb you," or something like that, and would probably have pressed her back again smilingly into her comfortable position; but to Doris he cannot say it. He is indeed both wounded and indignant at the manner in which she has acknowledged his coming. It is terrible to him that he should be treated as a bugbear, a wet blanket, one whose presence must perforce put an end to gayety of any kind.

He is about to explain why he has come, when the other men, following him, save him the trouble.

Sir Watkyn Wylde, shuffling cautiously up the room in the semi-darkness, has two or three providential escapes from a sudden death. Every chair and table in his way is as a pitfall laid for his destruction, and over each and all he stumbles heavily, in spite of the juvenile glass he has screwed into his left eye. "Why the dooce can't I see 'em?" he asks himself, indignantly, when he has just saved himself from falling over a *prie-dieu* by clutching wildly at a Queen Anne cabinet. The strongest glasses are of little use without some sight behind them, and Sir Watkyn's vision is by this time worn to a thread. With a suppressed curse upon the fools who prefer firelight to the honest glare of lamps, he totters feebly up the room to where Vera is sitting, and sinks into a lounge beside her with an aged groan, which he vainly endeavors to pass off as a sigh.

Gerald Burke, whose younger sight has conducted him with safety through the furniture quicksands with a swiftness not to be attained by all the double eye-glasses in Christendom, is leaning over the back of Vera's chair as Sir Watkyn arrives, and now stares down upon the dilapidated remains of that old beau with a sufferance born of a noble deference for age.

"What light can be compared to the tender glow emitted by pine logs?" says Sir Watkyn, with a burst of feeble enthusiasm meant to carry off the remembrance of the tottering and the groan, and to make the listener understand that the difficulties encountered during his journey up the room were due to haste, not to want of sight. "It is so soft, yet so brilliant. It seems to add even a deeper beauty (if that be possible) to a complexion such as yours."

He says this, leaning in an impressive manner towards Vera, with what he fondly but erroneously believes to be a sparkle of passion in his withered eye. The general effect

of this manœuvre is so mournful as almost to reduce one to the verge of tears.

The poor old man thinks he is looking into Vera's lovely orbs as he makes his little compliment, but, in the gentle dusk of the firelight he has so kindly lauded, he has missed his aim, and is staring with senile adulation at a marble knob upon the chimney-piece instead. The mistake, to the lookers-on, is ghastly.

"Ah, Sir Watkyn, I doubt you are a sad, sad flatterer," says Vera, smiling prettily. "Her mouth full small, and thereto soft and red," is parted, until all the little even teeth within, pale as pearls, can be seen,—alas! alas! but not by Sir Watkyn! His glassy gaze has now wandered from the chimney-piece to the oak carving on the back of her chair, which, being of a shiny description, he again mistakes for her eye.

"No, no. No, really," he says, quite delighted by the little touch of reproach in her tone. If she had said he was a "sad, sad flirt," he might perhaps have been even a degree more enraptured still.

"But yes indeed, and it isn't very kind of you; you shouldn't try to turn our heads," says Vera, letting her fan close with a tiny snap, that she may touch him with it on the back of his hand lightly, delicately.

Her manner to him is just a little different from what it is to others. She does not say, "Am I?" "Do you?" "Is it?" in the childish, helpless fashion that suits her so wonderfully; she treats him rather with a tender gayety that somehow suits her too,—a playful sweetness, that has in it just the barest *soupçon* of coquetry.

"Some people it is impossible to flatter," protests the old man, making a futile dab at her fan, as though to retain it, (and perhaps the hand that holds it), trying meanwhile to look as if he has said something hitherto unuttered.

"Sir Watkyn," says Doris at this moment, in her pleasantest tone. He is to her an object of positive aversion, but anything is better than seeing him next to her pretty *Bébé*. "Sir Watkyn, come to me. I really must have your opinion upon this subject."

Thus entreated, the ancient baronet perforce rises once more, and, after a terrible encounter with a tall footstool, that nearly precipitates him into Monica's arms, arrives at the side of his hostess.

"It is awfully good of you to be so kind to that old man," says Gerald Burke, bending over Vera; "but—but I think I would not flatter him quite so much if I were you: it will make him troublesome."

"It was he flattered me, wasn't it?" says Vera, mildly

"He said something pretty about my complexion, didn't he?"

"You should not have listened to him."

"Why?"—with grieved uplifted brows. "Was it untrue?"

"His compliment was such a finished one, and so original, you cannot want me to pay you another," says Burke, a little on edge in spite of himself.

"No,—oh, no!" says Vera, tranquilly. "But what you say is right. He did put that little speech about my being impossible to flatter, very nicely, *I* thought *too*."

An overpowering desire to look into her face seizes Burke. He accomplishes it. Nothing can be calmer, sweeter, than her expression, nothing less suggestive of hidden meaning of any sort.

"'Little speeches' of the sort you mean should at least possess the merit of being one's own," he says, shortly.

"Of course,"—thoughtfully: "that was what you meant just now when you said he was 'so original,' wasn't it?"

"I am afraid it wasn't," says Gerald, slowly. "One ceases to be original so very early in life that I fear even Sir Watkyn hasn't a chance of being so now."

"If he can't be that, he can at least be agreeable," says Vera, ever so sweetly, with a frank uplifting of her eyes to his. "You cannot deny that. If you do,"—smiling,—"I shall say you are jealous of him."

"Jealous of a galvanized old mummy like that! No," says Mr. Burke, coldly.

An airy little laugh breaks from Vera.

"Let us talk of something else," she says.

"With all my heart. Anything else will be more wholesome." Then, in a lower tone, filled with exquisite feeling, "Oh, Vera! how can we waste time discussing that old man, when there are so many sweet things to be remembered by us?"

"H'm?" says Vera, a query in her eyes and in her parted lips.

"Last night,—you remember that?" he says, lovingly, stooping nearer to her.

"Ah, yes! How could I ever forget it?" There is a touch of real delight in her tone as she says this, still with her eyes upturned to his, that brings a flush of rapturous gladness to his face. "It was my first big dance," she says, slowly. "One always"—with a seraphic glance—"remembers that, does not one?"

The rapturous gladness fades. A shade of bitterest disappointment takes its place.

"You will give it a corner in your heart for another reason besides that?" he says, looking at her strangely.

"Yes. But that must be the first. Oh, there are many other reasons why I should remember it. The fact that Doris was the most beautiful thing in the room, for instance; and because I had never heard Liddell's band before; and because having anything to eat at one o'clock in the morning was new to me; and because I was so hungry then; and because——Oh," as though an inconsiderable after-thought has come to her,—"and because of my dances with you!" She says this last as easily, with as little consciousness in either face or tone, as if that memorable half-hour on the balcony had never been.

"Is that all?" says Burke, with sudden sternness.

"All?" She looks prettily bewildered, and waves her fan to and fro, and lifts her brows as though in a vain endeavor to rack her brains for something further.

"There is a reason for which I shall remember it for ever and ever," says the young man, in a tone that trembles slightly. "Are you trying me, darling? Is it that? You have not really forgotten all that passed between us on the balcony last night?"

"Oh, that!" says Vera, slowly.

"You have not forgotten," goes on Burke, his voice vibrating with honest passion, bending his head even closer to her,—"you have not forgotten that you——"

"Do you know," says Vera, interrupting him at this important moment (though without any appearance of doing so intentionally), "that I can't bear people to speak to the back of my head." (He is leaning over the top of her chair.) "It makes me"—with the keenest show of regret at her own weakness—"absolutely nervous. It gives me the impression that I am sitting under a punkah, or having a bellows blown at me, or something. Doris says I'm very silly. Am I?" She appeals to him with the most artless smile in the world.

A loud report occurring at this moment prevents her receiving any reply. Dicky Browne having dropped an entire box of fusees into the fire, either by accident or design (it never transpires which), the room is in a commotion.

A regular sensation takes place, headed by a nervous scream from Mr. Mannering. Happening to be leaning against the mantel-piece at the time of the explosion, listening to a thrilling account of a late Irish dynamite plot, he now gives way to a violent yell.

Indeed, every one more or less jumps up, or pushes away from the fire, Vera included. Rising hurriedly, as if terrified to death, she goes over to Doris, and sinks on to the lounge beside her.

"I suppose he meant that kiss," she says to herself, alluding to Gerald's last remark. "So stupid of him!

When he is solemn like that, he is unsupportable; and, besides, he doesn't impress me in the least. I don't think any man could! And what a fuss to make about a simple thing like that! I granted it, certainly. Perhaps I should not; but he looked so much in want of it, and"—with a self-reproachful sigh—"I know my good nature will be my ruin."

Dicky's fusillade has done immense service. Under cover of it, Kit and Mr. Brabazon have retired beyond the ken of general observation. Just when the alarm came and seats were changed, they had melted insensibly into the shadow of the curtains, nearest the fire, and after that had disappeared into the more comfortable—because more isolated—retirement of a small anteroom opening off the drawing-room.

"I have been trying in vain to get you away from the others all day, to tell you something," says Neil, when he has successfully drawn her in here. "I heard of it this morning. It's—*it's come!*"

"What? The deluge?" asks Kit, with unpardonable levity and a strong inclination towards laughter.

"Yes,—*our* deluge," in a tone of the most hopeless dejection. "It is born!"

"Well," says Kit, "I have heard of a 'born fool,'"—with a rather malicious glance at him,—"but of a 'born deluge' —never!"

"Our deluge is a baby, and it was born yesterday," says Mr. Brabazon, slowly, who is too far gone in woe to feel even angry at her persistent want of gravity. "I had a telegram from my uncle Sir Michael. It is all over. Lady Brabazon has had a child, and it is well and healthy!"

"Oh, no! Oh, it can't be true," says Kit, sinking into a chair and looking as thunderstruck as even he can desire. "Dear! dear! how unfortunate!"

"Well, of course you knew it was going to happen," says Neil, playing a very abstracted air upon her shoulder.

"I heard of it,—yes. But I always thought there might be some mistake about it. I thought it *couldn't* be true," says poor Kit, tearfully.

"Well, it is,"—with ever-increasing gloom. "And it puts an end to my being the heir forever."

"Monica will never forgive it," says Kit. "Never."

"One can hardly expect her to. You are too—too pretty a girl to be thrown away upon a mere nobody." By this time he has reached the very lowest depths, and is wallowing there.

"Certainly I am," says Miss Beresford, with great spirit. "I consider myself good enough for the best man I know, and that is why"—holding out her arms to him with a

smile bordering upon tears—"I have given myself to you!"

"Oh, dear, dear heart, it is unfair of me," says Neil, remorsefully, when more pressing business can be laid aside for a moment. "I should consider you beyond every other thing."

"I hope you always will," says Kit, gayly, rubbing her cheek to his. "If you don't, there will be civil war. But now let us go back to our misfortunes. Tell me more of this horrid little importation."

"I can't tell you anything more. It was born yesterday. Sir Michael himself telegraphed,—evidently in the highest spirits. It is disgraceful of him, at his age. Why, he can't even hope to see it grown up."

"Mark my words, it won't thrive with him," says Kit, solemnly. "Not the child,—I don't mean that,"—hastily; "but his injustice to you. I am afraid Monica will be more and more against you when she hears about this. A son and heir, you see,—odious little thing!—will of course put you out of the property forever."

"It—it isn't a son; it's a daughter," says Neil.

"A daughter!—a girl!—a dear little girl!" cries Kit, with a sudden change of tone. "Oh, you silly boy! how could you frighten me so? Monica won't mind a bit about that. What earthly harm can there be in a girl? Why, the little darling thing—I'm so fond of babies: aren't you?—may never have a brother, and then all will be well for you."

"Sure to have them,—*heaps* of them," says Mr. Brabazon, refusing to be comforted.

"Why?"—indignantly.

"Oh, sure to,"—despondently.

"Well, *I* don't think so," says Miss Beresford, in a tone that warns him he had better not think so too, and at once.

"Kit, where are you?" calls somebody from the drawing-room.

"I must go," says Kit: but she evidently makes a mistake about it, because it is to him she goes as she says it.

"One instant," says Brabazon, holding her. "Tell me you don't let Mannering so much as look at you."

"Never."

"Now, when this telegram becomes public property, they will put on double pressure and try to induce you to marry him."

"They may try,—I can't prevent that,—but the trying will end in failure. How can you speak to me of such a man as Mr. Mannering? Now, if it were anybody else; but he—he is impossible!"

"Do you mean me to understand, then, 'that somebody

else' might *not* be impossible?" asks Brabazon, distinctly offended.

"What a horrid little speech from you to me! Once"—mischievously—"you told me my chiefest charm in your eyes lay in the fact that you could never distrust me. Where is that charm now? Is it gone? or are your eyes blinded?"

"Kit," calls the soft voice from the drawing-room again. This time there is in it a suspicion of irritability.

"I *must* go," says Kit, in a hurried whisper.

"One other moment. You will write to me?"

"Yes, yes."

"I shall write to you every day. The day I fail I shall be ill or dying."

"Oh, Neil! Do not say that. It sounds so unlucky."

"It is true. And you?"

"I shall answer every letter you write me the day I get it."

"Next month, perhaps, and certainly at Christmas, I shall run down to Lislee and ride over to see you, be you here or there. They cannot object to that."

"Let them," says Kit, rebelliously. "And now—good-by."

"One kiss more," says Brabazon; after which there are several "kisses more," and then a careless and leisurely return to the drawing-room, meant to signify that passages of a tender nature have by no means been the cause of their lengthened absence.

CHAPTER XV.

"I am a woman, needes must I speak,
Or elles swell until mine hearte break.'

THEY have all gone: the very sound of the departing wheels has died away.

The light of heaven is almost gone, too; darker and darker grows the "twilight gray."

The border-land that divides evening from night is very nearly passed; the tall elms in the avenue are growing indistinct; the cows far down in the meadows are lowing for the milkmaid; NOX—calm daughter of Chaos—is descending; already is her coming felt; "Silence hath set her finger with deep touch upon creation's brow."

Doris is still standing by the fire her guests have just

quitted, and, with eyes intently fixed upon the glowing logs, seems to seek in them a kinder fortune than has yet been given her.

All through the last two hours—in between the snatches of laughter and apparent light-heartedness—the words uttered by her aunt have sounded their discordant chord within her breast.

That her husband should be indifferent to her charms is a thing she has taught herself to look upon as a natural result of the contract sealed between them: but that he should be alive to the charms of another means to her nothing less than degradation. And yet it should have been anticipated by her. The heart capable of love must find somewhere an outlet for its affections; and this woman, —this Mrs. Montague Smythe,—she had been something to him (how much who shall say?) in those earlier days when she, Doris, and her fatal fortune had been unknown. A pang of bitterest regret, seizing upon her heart-strings, renders her white to her very lips.

And yet it may not be true; it may be only idle gossip. One word from him will be sufficient to satisfy her of its truth or falsehood. Some innate knowledge of him assures her that a plain "yes" or "no" from him, without oath or asseveration of any kind, will be all-convincing.

To put the question to him—as she had told her aunt she would do—is still a settled determination with her; but how to do it? how to meet him face to face, and in cold language ask it? There is the rub! Even as she so debates with herself in miserable uncertainty, he comes into the room, and advances towards a distant table.

A chill falls upon her; her lips feel parched and dumb; but the desire to set her fear at rest, one way or the other, never grows less. She *will* ask him, and now. Nothing —no weakness—shall prevent her; only give her time,—time. She lays one little hand wearily against her forehead.

In truth, there is very little time to give. Clontarf, who has plainly come for a book, not for conversation, having secured the desired volume, turns again to the door. He has almost reached it, when she compels herself to turn in his direction.

She has lowered her hand from her brow to the side of her head. The other hand she has laid upon the mantelpiece to steady herself, as though her body as well as her resolution needs support. Both are frail.

As she parts her lips to speak to him, a minor difficulty presents itself. His fingers have already closed upon the handle of the door; his back is turned to her. How shall she make him understand? how attract his attention?

Strive as she may, and often has, she has never yet been able to compel herself to address him by his Christian name. Even now she cannot manage it.

"Can I—will you stay one moment?—I want to ask you a question," she stammers, at last, the words coming from her with painful embarrassment, and with an enforced coldness, born of shyness, that sounds frigid even to herself. How much more so to him!

Taking his hand from the door, he faces her. There is unmistakable anger in his eyes.

"Have you never yet heard my Christian name,—or is it because you have forgotten it," he asks, drawing nearer to her, and regarding her with great disfavor, "that you will never call me by it?"

"I have not forgotten it." Her eyes are on the ground as she says this slowly, icily.

"Then I am to understand that you object to using it," says Clontarf, frowning; "that you prefer the inconvenience of having to wait to catch my eye every time you deign to offer me a remark, to addressing me by any familiar term?"

This is so exactly what she has done a hundred times, that she naturally resents his words with exceeding bitterness.

"I so seldom care to address you, that it is scarcely worth while bringing the matter up," she says, disdainfully, turning away from him.

"True. You score one there," says Donat, with a joyless laugh.

"Besides," abruptly, facing him again, and speaking with some vehemence, "if you think my refusal to mention your name is a sign that I have forgotten it, have I not the same reason for supposing you have forgotten mine."

"Yet I have not," says Clontarf, quickly. "Doris! It is too pretty a name to be lightly forgotten. But"—with a certain change of tone—"you want me, is it not? You have a question to ask me?" He waits for her to speak, in the listless attitude of one longing to depart, and to whom interest is unknown.

"Yes. A simple question,—yet hardly one, after all. I——" Her bloodless lips almost refuse to let the words pass them, but her will conquers, and she goes on—"I hope it is not true, what I have heard about you and Mrs. Montague Smythe."

"What have you heard?"

"That you were—in love—with her once. That is nothing,"—hastily, and with a faint but expressive motion of the hand; "but that you are in love with her *still*,—that, if true, is terrible!"

Her voice fails her as she finishes, but she holds her pretty stately head erect as ever.

"It is not true," says Clontarf, slowly. "I never have been, I never should be in love with her."

"She is very beautiful." Her voice is still low, and her eyes, though not altogether averted, are turned away from him to the fire.

"Very. You believe me, nevertheless?"

"Yes, I believe you." Then she turns her eyes away from the fire and back to him again. "I should believe anything you told me," she says, simply.

"Thank you." Her manner touches him. "Who tried to poison your mind with that unlikely tale?" he asks, regarding her keenly.

"You must not ask me that. I am glad to know it is untrue; I am glad for your sake. It would be so cruel for you. And yet"—with a weary gesture—"it may happen any day. It is but putting it off from to-day to to-morrow, as it may be. They tell us all hearts must awake to love once in their lifetime: it is, therefore, but a question of time."

"It will not be worse for me than for you, at that rate," says Clontarf, with affected lightness, yet he is watching her narrowly. How sad she looks! What means that slow warm blush that is creeping upwards, dyeing cheek and brow? Is she thinking of last night?—of—of Bouverie? He hates himself and her as he asks himself this question.

"It is an ugly thought: I am sorry I introduced it," she says, with some emotion. "Let us not discuss it. Tell me: this Mrs. Montague Smythe,—is she a widow?"

"N—o. Not exactly. Smythe is somewhere,—in Brazil, or Barbadoes, or the Feejee Islands; no one knows exactly where. But he is alive, beyond doubt."

"Why isn't she with him?"

"Travelling knocks her up so," says Clontarf, mildly. "And the sea, to her, means death." He is evidently repeating a speech made to him. "At least, so she says."

"I see: I suppose this kind of thing suits her."

"It may. But I think she makes a mistake all the same. A woman situated as she is—no widow, yet literally without a husband—is a wretched thing."

"One can hardly be sure. She looks very happy. I dare say one might find a woman—*with* a husband—more wretched than she is."

"Meaning yourself?" The words come from him impulsively, almost without his permission,—full of impetuous anger, not unmixed with scorn. A moment later he shall have gladly recalled them, but it is then too late:

"He that hath missaid, I dare well sayn,
He may by no way call his word again.
Thing that is said is said, and forth it go'th,
Though him repent, or be he ne'er so loth."

A deadly silence follows his question, and then—

"That is the last thing *you* should have said to *me*," murmurs she, haughtily, all trace of feeling gone from her face. With a superb gesture she sweeps past him, and leaves the room.

CHAPTER XVI.

"If thou be poor, thy brother hateth thee,
And all thy friendès flee from thee, alas!"

"BRIAN!" calls Mrs. Desmond, eagerly, hearing his footsteps pass her room door. Evidently her voice reaches him, because he stops, and, opening the door, comes in. The room is warm, and full of subtile fragrance that suggests violets, though Christmas is nigh at hand and those frail favorites are as yet hiding beneath their mother earth.

Monica is sitting before a roaring fire, clad in a charming dressing-gown of white cashmere and lace, that serves her beauty as a frame, looking the very picture of misery.

"What's the matter with my mouse now?" says Brian, in his fond fashion, kneeling at her feet, and taking her little woe-begone face into his hands. Her eyes are full of trouble, and her hair almost on end.

"Yes, I dare say it is untidy," she says, involuntarily lifting her hands to her fair frowsy head, and sighing deeply. "I've been thinking so hard that I've rumpled my head against the cushions."

Her lips take a desolate curve, that is as effective with him now as in the old days when he went "a-wooing."

"Poor hair!" he says, stroking it tenderly. Then—"You're cold," he declares, and straightway breaks the lumps of coals into a blazing flame, that goes madly up the chimney. In truth, it is cold; a whole month has gone by since Kit whispered her last farewell to Brabazon, and now snow and ice lie upon the ground.

"It isn't the cold," says Monica.

"No? Then tell me what it is. What is this new wrong?"

"This old wrong, you mean. She—she won't give him up."

"'She' is Kit, I suppose, and 'him' is Brabazon."

"Yes. She won't even look at the other in that way."

"The other being Mannering?"

"If you are going to be stupid, Brian, I hope you will go away," says Mrs. Desmond, severely.

"I couldn't be that, my dear, if I tried," returns her husband, mildly. "And so she won't give him up, eh?—Mannering, I mean; no, by the bye, it is Brabazon I mean."

"Any one can see that she won't. She gets a letter from him every morning, and shuts herself up in her room to answer it every afternoon. It is so obstinate of her, so provoking; and yet she is the dearest girl in the world. There is no one like her. It is a terrible thing to see her so bent on throwing herself away, and Mr. Mannering is all that one could desire."

"Not exactly all, perhaps."

"Yes, he is. He is young, kind-hearted, domesticated, and sincere."

"He isn't half the man that Brabazon is."

"He has fifteen thousand pounds a year," says Mrs. Desmond, solemnly. "That ought to make him a very good man indeed. Why, he is even a better match than you were."

"If you expect me to agree with you there," says Mr. Desmond, with dignity, "you will find yourself mistaken. In my opinion, there isn't my match in the United Kingdom."

"Oh, you know what I mean," says Monica, patting his cheek in an absent fashion. "But isn't it a pity she should have preferred Neil?"

"I don't see how she could have helped it. *You* prefer him, don't you?"

"I?"

"Yes,"—stoutly. "You think him worth a dozen of that dull Englishman, only you won't say so."

"It is true," says Monica, despairingly. "I believe he is worth a dozen of most young men; but one can't live on worth."

"One might live on something worse."

"Yes, and go naked. It is my belief, Brian," says his wife, indignantly, "that in private, behind my back, you encourage Kit in her folly."

"I certainly think Brabazon is the better fellow of the two," says Desmond, slowly, refusing to lower his colors. "His face alone would carry the day with a woman. Now, think of Mannering's voice, and that perpetual cold in his head——"

"It is not perpetual. He is not inured to our climate yet," says Monica, refusing to give in. "Because Neil Brabazon is as handsome as a Greek god is no reason why

Mr. Mannering should be placed outside the pale of every woman's fancy. And just show me the person who has not had a cold in the head at one period or another."

"I dare say it may be that," says Desmond, amiably. "But I hate a fellow who can't shoot."

"What has shooting got to do with choosing a husband? That is so like a man! Does one marry such and such a person just because he can bring down more birds to his gun than the rest of his fellows?"

"I should, if I were a girl."

"Well, I shouldn't. I should positively dislike a man who distinguished himself in that way."

"Good gracious! what is to become of me, then?" asks Mr. Desmond, with deep emotion. "They tell me my eye is unerring."

"Pluck it out," says Monica; whereupon they both break into laughter. "But, really, I wish you would be reasonable about this," she says, presently, sighing again.

"I think I am the most reasonable fellow alive. It is a pity she won't prefer Mannering, but, as she doesn't, I don't see what is to be done. The locking-up and bread-and-water-diet system has rather gone out of fashion of late years; and no one can be dragged to the altar by an incensed father and her back hair in these degenerate days. So perforce one comes to a stand-still."

"I can see you are not on my side," says Monica, with reproachful melancholy. "Well, it can't be helped."

"That I should have an opinion of my own can't be helped indeed, and is no reason why I should be looked upon askance and scolded by a cross little wife. After all, was there ever such an ass as that Mannering? He can't shoot, he can't ride, he can't talk. Hang it," says Mr. Desmond, with a burst of comic disgust, "he can't even laugh like another fellow."

"He is an honorable and a well-meaning man," says Monica.

"I dare say. It is easy for you to support him, but you don't bear the brunt of the battle as I do. I've suffered far more over all this affair than you have. I'm bored to death by him. Of course I am bound to let him sit in the smoking-room at night, but I swear to you there are many moments when with difficulty I restrain myself from flinging something at him with a view to altering the self-satisfied smirk on his long countenance. And, after all, for what am I enduring this? Does he really mean to propose to Kit or not? Perhaps he doesn't, you know."

"Certainly he does."

"Well, he is hanging fire an uncommon long time."

"How can you speak like that, Brian? You know"—

reproachfully—"that he adores her. The least encouragement would do it."

"If he is waiting for that, I am afraid it will never be done."

"He has told me a thousand times that the dearest wish of his heart is to call her his wife. What more can he do?"

"He could tell *her* that. That would be considerably more to the purpose, to my mind."

"It is very hard of a man to speak when a girl won't listen. But he means to speak. That I know. Surely he has hinted as much as that to you."

"Well, yes, I believe he has," acknowledges Desmond, truthfully. "At least he made some elephantine attempts in that direction. A greater fool at hinting,—indeed," correcting himself with consummate care, "a greater fool at *everything*—it has seldom been my lot to meet."

"You are hard on him, I think. He would make an unexceptionable husband."

"He'll never make one at all, if he doesn't hurry. What does he mean by dangling after her for months? Why doesn't he come to the point, if he wants her, and say what is expected of him? That is what girls like."

"How do you know?" says Mrs. Desmond, very justly incensed by this remark.

"Through you, of course. *I* came to the point in double-quick time, and you liked it, didn't you?"

"But you are so different from everybody else," says Monica, in a soft tone, bending towards him. Here a few courtesies are interchanged, which need not be gone into: I despise the persons who would seek to pry into the sanctities of married life.

"Then you think he ought to propose to her in form?" asks Monica, presently. "Well, so do I. A *bonâ fide* declaration goes a long way with most women. And she certainly doesn't dislike him. That is a great matter. She has indeed been very nice to him ever since Neil's departure: don't you think so?"

"It is always difficult to be sure; but if running away from him, round every corner, the moment she sees him coming, is a sign of it, I am positive she is nicer to him than she is to most people."

"If you mean," says Mrs. Desmond, severely, "that Kit avoids him, I don't believe it."

"I seldom mean anything," says Mr. Desmond, with a wisdom beyond his years. "But I think the sooner this affair is brought to a definite conclusion the better for all of us: you just tip him the wink, and——"

"You mean——" interrupts Monica, with carefully-

wrinkled brows of utter perplexity, being scarcely in the humor to appreciate slang.

"Well, you just give him to understand that 'faint heart never won fair lady,' and—trust for the rest," says Brian, airily. "It can do no harm, you know, and *may* waft him to England."

"You are hoping she will refuse him," says his wife, reproachfully.

"I am hoping for nothing, just now, but my dinner. I say,"—looking at his watch,—"we have barely ten minutes to get into our things."

CHAPTER XVII.

"Madame, rue upon my painè's smart,
For with a word ye may me slay or save."

"Have mercy, sweet, or you will do me dey!"

WHETHER Monica gave the desired hint or not, who shall say? Certainly, neither she nor Mr. Mannering ever confessed to it; but about half-past ten to-night, when they all chance to be together in the billiard-room, Monica, by some special device, carries off The Desmond, her husband, and Dicky Browne, on some impossible voyage of discovery, leaving by this manœuvre Kit and Mannering alone. She chooses the moment for her exit when Kit is deep in a game of billiards with Mannering, so that, if even inclined to do so, Kit could not follow her without a seeming rudeness to her adversary. But, to confess the truth, Kit is so wrapt in her game that she fails to notice Monica's absence until it comes to an end.

"Why, where have they all gone?" she asks then, with an accent of surprise.

"I don't know. Mrs. Desmond said something about the gun-room, but I didn't quite follow her."

"Well, do so now," says Kit, gayly, moving towards the door.

"Presently, as you wish it; but first,"—coming nearer to her, and looking very solemn,—"first, Miss Beresford, I must beg that you will grant me a few minutes: I have something to say to you."

"To-morrow,—any time to-morrow," says Kit, with nervous generosity. A wild desire to run is overpowering her, with which is conflicting the certainty that her knees are bending under her. Oh, where is Monica? where is Brian? where—*where* is Dicky Browne?

"Now,—if I may venture to press the point," says Mannering, formally. Poor man! he doesn't mean to be formal; his knees too are giving way, but his dignity demands that an outward show of calm self-possession be kept up.

"Oh, certainly," says Kit, faintly.

"You have doubtless," begins he, slowly, "for a long time been aware of——"

"I haven't," says Kit, in an agony. "I haven't, indeed. I assure you, I haven't been aware of anything!" (Good gracious! why doesn't even the footman come in?)

"I think you must have had some slight foreshadowing of what I am now about to say," persists the Englishman, with gentle correction. His tone is stiff,—so stiff that, as if by magic, Kit's mood changes, and her fright vanishes in an irrepressible desire for laughter. It is a sort of reaction, and, being so, is difficult of control. How ridiculous he looks, with that important expression on his stolid face!

"If you are going to tell me a story," she says, with an affectation of gayety, "I hope it will be a funny one."—"*That* ought to check him," she says to herself. But it doesn't. Mr. Mannering, being wound up, is bound to go.

"A story indeed I have got to tell," he says, with ever-increasing gravity, "but whether the end of it will mean for me mirth or woe, depends entirely upon you. My admiration for you must, I think,—I trust,—have been for some time apparent. I now detain you for the purpose of laying my hand and fortune at your feet."

"And your heart?" says Kit, trying miserably to treat the whole affair with lightness. "What of that? Will you not offer me that too?"

"Impossible!" with a stately bow. "It is no longer mine to give. It has been in your possession for six months and fourteen days precisely."

At this accurate mention of so curious a date Kit may be pardoned if she shows undue astonishment.

"I allude to that hour when first I saw you," says Mannering, answering her look, "in the China Section of the South Kensington Museum."

There is something so honestly earnest even in his pomposity that Kit's heart, a tender thing at all times, is touched; yet she is silent. What to say, and how to say it, is now her chief trouble.

"May I hope that I am worthy of your acceptance?" says Mannering, regarding her silence as mere maidenly confusion. He likes the thought that this shyness has been produced by him. It only renders her still more desirable in his eyes. How sweet, how gentle she looks,

with her soft eyes thus cast down, and her color heightened! She is naturally nervous, as a young girl should be in such circumstances, but not unbecomingly so:

> "In her is highè beauty without pride,
> And youth withoutè greenhood or folly."

She is, indeed, all that his heart can wish her.

"Am I worthy?" he says again, humbly indeed, but yet with a latent sense that all things will soon be well with him.

"I wish all this had never happened," says Kit, suddenly yet slowly. "I wish with all my heart it had not."

There is something in the profound seriousness of her tone that carries conviction with it and makes itself felt.

"I have taken you somewhat by surprise, perhaps," says Mannering, hastily, the first faint doubt of a favorable ending to his suit dyeing his face crimson. "I entreat you not to answer me too hurriedly. Take till to-morrow, take until next year, if you will: only——"

"It would be no use, indeed," says Kit, ever so gently. "None."

"A young girl cannot always be sure of her own mind: many ideas may serve to change it," says the unfortunate man, his voice growing more and more unsteady. "Do think it over. I can wait. I shall be thankful to be *allowed* to wait."

"I am sure if you waited forever it would make no difference," says Kit, tenderly, now in deep distress. Why will he not take his rejection reasonably, and go away? But Mr. Mannering has one last card to play before rendering himself invisible. It is indeed his last card, and, as he hopes, a trump.

"There is one other thing," he begins, flushing nervously. "I—I greatly dislike having to bring it before you, and I assuredly should not do so if matters had been different between us. But now,—now every little thing that may help me in my suit is of importance. I cannot afford to let it go by. And—and, in fact, I *must* tell you"—raising his head—"that my income is fifteen thousand a year."

"I thought it was even more," says Kit, quietly.

This is indeed a death-blow: no other answer she could have given could have been so effectual. To refuse more than fifteen thousand pounds a year! It is all up with him indeed. And yet a final effort breaks from him.

"I would settle anything you like on you," he says, forlornly, in a choking voice that hasn't a vestige of hope in it now. "Anything!"—despairingly—"everything! The whole of it!"

"Oh! do not talk to me like that," says Kit, with tears in her eyes. "Indeed, it does no good. If I loved you, it would make no difference to me whether you were poor or rich. Would you have me marry you when I don't love you? No, surely not; and, besides, I could not do it."

"I believe that. I believe you are too true and pure to be bought by any gold," says Mannering, with a burst of dismal admiration. Seizing her hand, he wrings it spasmodically, until pain brings fresh tears to her eyes, and they threaten to overflow; yet, full of martyr zeal, she scorns to make a sign, but suffers, and is strong.

"Let me be your friend still," entreats she, liking him better now in his downfall than she has ever liked him before. "You——"

"No! no! not that! Do not let us waste time over such nonsense as that!" exclaims he, miserably. "You will be trying to make yourself out my sister next,—girls always do; but what's the good of a sister to a fellow when he wants a wife? No, it must be all or nothing!" He looks almost tragic as he says this, and stalks away from her (walks wouldn't do at all) to the door, as though all things have indeed come to an end for him and he is meditating an immediate start for the North Pole.

But at the door he comes to a halt, and finally returns to where she is standing near the billiard-table.

"It is Brabazon, of course?" he says, forlornly.

"Yes," says Kit, hanging her head.

"He hasn't a penny," says the wretched young man.

"That has got so little to do with it," returns she, softly.

"Yes, yes. One can understand it: he is a very handsome fellow," says poor Mr. Mannering, in a very desolate tone.

It is so desolate that Kit fairly bursts out crying.

"It isn't that, either," she says. "It is neither beauty, nor money, nor anything; it is only that—that—that he is he! Oh, how I wish that you and he were one, and then nobody need be unhappy!"

As this remarkable phenomenon (the incorporating of two bodies into one) is hardly likely to occur in Mr. Mannering's time, this tender wish fails to convey to that afflicted gentleman the comfort he desires.

"Do—do try to forget me," she sobs, and hurries from the room.

Left to himself, he paces the floor in a state as nearly bordering on distraction as can be felt by a phlegmatic man.

> "All love is sweet,
> Given or returned,"

sings Shelley; but Mr. Mannering in his present frame of

mind would have written him down an ass, and voted him laboring under a delusion when giving way to such a sentiment. Given! Where unreturned? What gall can be more bitter?

> "Common as light is love,
> And its familiar voice wearies not ever."

There again, to Mr. Mannering's mind, the poet is at fault: he at least is wearied to death by it. What has it brought him? Only disappointment, sorrow, and loss of his self-regard. He is still striding up and down the room, sore and sick at heart, and to all things disallied, when to him enters Mr. Browne.

"Have a game, Mannering?" says he, in his most buoyant style, unheeding the blighted look of his companion.

"No," says Mannering, brusquely. Now, few people say "No" in that uncompromising way without adding a qualification of some kind, so that, naturally, Mr. Browne stares hard at him.

"You won't?" he says, mildly.

"No, I won't," says Mannering, who feels that billiards and friends and such like necessaries must for the future be regarded by him as less than naught.

"What's the matter with you, old man?" says Dicky, staring harder. There is a touch of concern in his tone, beneath which Mr. Mannering gives way.

"It's all over with me! I'm a ruined man!" he says, letting his head fall forward on his hands. By this time he is sitting down in a huge arm-chair near the fire.

"Bless me! what has he done now?" says Dicky to himself. "Is it poison? or money? or Kit?" He evidently inclines to the latter belief, because presently he says, in a low tone, "Have you been having it out with Kit?"

"She wouldn't let me have it out: she rejected me almost before the words passed my lips. I am positively abhorrent to her."

"Oh, come now!" says Mr. Browne, cheerfully. "You mustn't talk like that, you know. She's too nice a girl to abhor anybody. And, after all, a little affair of this sort is really not worth troubling about. It doesn't make a fellow a bit a worse fellow because one particular girl don't choose to fancy a fellow. Some other girl will, if she won't."

"There is no other girl," says Mr. Mannering, in a deep voice, his face still hidden in his hands. This sweeping assertion is treated by Dicky as it deserves.

"Oh, yes, there is,—lots of 'em," he says, scorning grammar. "Somebody told me yesterday that there are fifteen women to every man in Ireland. Think of that! Kit is

number one of your lot; you will be all right when you meet number two."

"I shall not," says Mannering, in a still more hollow tone, grief rendering him feeble. He has fallen so low that he is even glad to air his woes before the erstwhile detested Dicky. Any sympathy is better than none, and Dicky is full of it. "I tell you, she has ruined my life. I shall never meet another girl."

("If he continues much longer in this mad strain," says Mr. Browne to himself, "I shall have to have recourse to violent remedies.")

"You're sure to. They are not to be avoided," he says, aloud, with the utmost cheerfulness. "They are everywhere, like the mumps."

"And equally to be desired," says the slighted man, with a groan. "No, no; you mean well, Browne, but consolation is useless here. I feel," smiting his breast, "that—that—I *can't* feel!" (This is obscure, and therefore decidedly telling.) "All is a void, a chaos! I had so set my heart upon her. She is the only woman I—," he is going to say "ever loved," but checks himself in time, a twinkle in Mr. Browne's eye, or some memory of a comic nature, restraining him. "I adored her," he says, at last, very dolefully.

"You oughtn't to feel so bad about it, at that rate," says Dicky, comfortably. "We've been told that 'the pleasure of love is in loving.' That ought to stand to you. You can't"—severely—"have loved her properly, if you don't feel some of the pleasure now."

"Well, I don't," says Mannering, candidly. "Pleasure is a thing I shall never know again. What's the good"—with vehement indignation—"of my having money? What's the good of *anything?* It won't buy me a set of Greek features, or the girl I want?"

"It would if you went to the East," says Dicky.

"I'm the most unfortunate man alive. Everything is against me. I declare to you," throwing out his hands, "I never yet set my heart upon a thing that I wasn't thwarted!"

"'I never loved a tree or flower,'" quotes Mr. Browne, sympathetically, in a carefully-subdued voice,—which is strictly true, Dicky's affections being confined to a few chosen friends and—Dicky Browne.

"Yes, just so. That exactly expresses my unhappy state," says Mannering, grasping at the sickly sentiment. "'I never loved a dear gazelle,'—yes! That is indeed how it is with me."

"Well, neither did I, you know," says Dicky, who, seeing breakers ahead in the increasing tearfulness of his companion, thinks it prudent to fall back again upon the cheerful tack. "And so much the better, eh? They've got

horns, haven't they? even the dearest of 'em,—eh? Tough customers to shower one's caresses on! Look here, Mannering, you just pull yourself together, and you'll forget it all in no time."

"I shan't," says Mr. Mannering.

"I tell you you will. Take example by me. Love all women, but don't love *one*. That's the whole law. The *one* plays the very mischief with a fellow. Take care of Number One."

"I always do," says Mr. Mannering, regretfully, shaking his head as though to insinuate that this advice is superfluous.

"No, you don't," says Dicky, innocently, "or you wouldn't have made such an ass—that is, I beg your pardon,"—reddening,—"you wouldn't have been such a foo—ahem! Fact is,"—growing absolutely crimson,—"you should try and be more the man."

"I can't," says Mr. Mannering.

"Oh, I say! rouse yourself," exclaims Dicky, in some disgust. But the other is past rousing,—intellectually, at least.

"I shall leave here to-morrow morning by the earliest train," he says, in a suicidal tone. "I shall never willingly see her again. But—but—Browne, I may have wronged you in some ways, I may have thought you light, frivolous, unthinking——"

"Oh, don't mention it," puts in Mr. Browne, parenthetically.

"But I will confide to you my last message to her! Tell her," says the rueful knight, rising tragically to his feet,—"tell her that, though she has burst my heart in twain, the fragments shall lie upon her shrine forever. Tell her, one word will recall me to her side, though my tent be fixed upon the arid plains. Tell her—Browne," with a sudden collapse from the heights of tragedy to the plains of sober sense, "I'll be very much obliged to you if you will just say a word or two to her about the fifteen thousand a year."

"I'll say as many as ever I can get in," says Mr. Browne, grasping the proffered hand, and speaking in a tone that suggests the possibility of his choking presently. This possibility (being, as he believes, the outcome of suppressed sympathy) is deeply grateful to Mr. Mannering's wounded spirit, though a less intelligent observer might perhaps have thought it the result of suppressed laughter.

"I shall go to my room. I could not trust myself to see her again. Good-night," says Mannering, dolefully, and hurries from the room.

Only just in time! He is hardly out of sight when again the door opens, and Kit peeps cautiously in.

"Oh, it's you, Dicky," she says, with an air of undisguised relief; then she comes quite in. "What's the matter with you?" she says, a moment later, looking at Mr. Browne with an austere glance, that young man being in the state that is commonly and vulgarly called "doubled up with laughter."

"It's nothing,—a mere spasm," he says, and then chokes, and roars, and wriggles, all over again.

"A very severe one," she says, with ominous calm. "You won't be able to undo yourself if you go on twisting like that." Mr. Browne taking no notice of this sarcasm, she changes her tone. "Dicky," she says, in a careful whisper, looking once more in stage fashion around her, "where—*where is he?*"

"First 'her,'—then 'he,'—I feel as if I were at school again. It is nothing but pronouns to-night," says Dicky, lifting his brows. "If you mean the man you have so cruelly consigned to an early grave, all I can say is——"

"Where is he?" demands Miss Beresford, ruthlessly interrupting him. "Is he gone? for good, I mean—or——"

"No, for bad," ominously.

"What I mean is," says Kit, impatiently, "is he coming back here again to-night?"

"He is never coming back anywhere again. When he left this room a few minutes since, it was with the avowed design of making away with himself. 'Tell her,' he said, 'I go to put it beyond her power to cast her false eyes upon my face again.'"

"I don't believe one word of that," says Kit.

"Don't you? If it gives your troubled conscience any ease, don't, I entreat you. But my own belief is that your unfortunate victim is now this moment dangling by the neck from the tower window, and that he is dead—dead—dead." No writer could convey to you the rooted melancholy of Mr. Browne as he slowly delivers himself of these last three words.

"I wish you wouldn't, Dicky," says Kit, whimpering, and feeling rather frightened. "I know you are talking nonsense, but it is such nasty nonsense! What I really want to know is whether he is going away at once,—out of the house, I mean? *Do* say he is going somewhere,—anywhere, far from this."

"Very far," says Dicky, solemnly. "The rope he has employed is even now, *now* as we are idly talking here, transporting him to 'that bourn from which no traveller returns.' I hope it is a stout rope: don't you? Poor, poor fellow!"

"I think you might try to be sensible just for once," says Kit, tearfully.

"Sometimes, however, the travellers do return," goes on Mr. Browne, thoughtfully. "There have been several authentic stories to that effect. They return to earth to haunt those to whom in life they owed their destruction. You won't like it when Mannering comes to your bedside some night with the blue and vivid marks of strangulation on his lily-white throat. Though"—meditatively—"perhaps, after all, it is better than his taking his head under his arm."

"You are surpassing yourself to-night. You are positively eloquent," says Kit, scornfully.

"He sent you his love," goes on Mr. Browne, unmoved, "and a kiss. He said I was to deliver the latter. It was his parting legacy to me. What! you decline to receive even the dying embrace of your unhappy victim? Can callousness farther go?"

"I insist upon knowing what he really said to you," says Kit.

"There need be no insistence: I am only too willing to communicate to you our poor friend's expiring remarks. 'Tell her,' he said, 'that one word will recall me to her side forever!' Oh, think of that! Fancy the horror of having a ghastly corpse tied to your side forever. Fortunately, he forgot to say the 'word,' or I should be obliged to repeat it, and in your dreams some night you might by some fell chance give voice to it and be thenceforth his slave."

"I suppose you think you are amusing," says Kit, with scathing contempt.

"He said something, too," says Mr. Browne, dreamily, "about fifteen thousand a year. I don't exactly remember what; I was naturally agitated beyond my powers of endurance, but no doubt it was to the effect that he meant to bequeath to you all that he possessed, before taking the fatal leap. Oh, Kit! How could you so mislead a trusting heart?"

"I didn't,"—indignantly. "He never got the faintest encouragement from me. I always thought him the greatest——"

"Speak gently of the dead," says Dicky, softly, elevating his hand. "It must be all over now. Would you like to come up with me and cut him down? It will be the last sweet service you can render him."

"I wonder"—wrathfully—"how you can be so unfeeling."

"*I* wonder how *you* can ever know a happy moment again. Alas! 'all tragedies are finished by a death; all comedies are ended by a marriage.'"

"There wasn't one spark of tragedy about this wretched affair. There couldn't be, when he was the hero of it."

"You wouldn't say so if you saw him as I did. He mouthed like King Lear, ranted like Othello, and lamented like Romeo."

"A pretty Romeo, forsooth!"

"He made very flattering mention of you at first, but just at the last he—he—really, my dear Kit, I quite shrink from confessing it, but the truth is, he called you—a—brute!"

"*What!*" says Miss Beresford, growing really two inches taller on the spot.

"Well, yes, it sounds horrid, doesn't it? But the fact remains; he certainly called you a 'gazelle.' I don't think that was nice of him. It wasn't gentlemanly, I think: do you?" with anxious inquiry.

"I shall go to bed," says Kit, with dignity, turning away from him.

"But not to rest, I trust. At your tender age the conscience cannot be altogether seared. Remorse must gnaw you. Remember, as you lie upon your downy couch, that he is still dangling in mid-air."

"Oh, good-night!" says Miss Beresford, contemptuously.

"'So young, and *so* untender!'" murmurs Dicky, with a regretful sigh.

CHAPTER XVIII.

"Upon thy glade days have in thy mind
The unware woe of harm that comes behind."

"A HAPPY Christmas to you, my bird! my treasure!" says Mrs. Desmond, bending over the cot that contains her son and heir.

It is indeed Christmas morning. Outside all the world is white with snow, and up from the village, faintly, sweetly, borne upon the strong wind, come the bells, welcoming in this holiest of tides.

It is barely eight o'clock, but Monica, clad only in slippers and a dressing-gown, has rushed along the corridor to be the earliest to wish sweet wishes to her pretty boy on this his first Christmas day.

"Darling thing! See how he puts out his arms to me. Oh, nurse, isn't he *sweet?*" appealing to the big and comely woman beside her.

"'Deed he is, ma'am, that surely, an' a deal more," says nurse, heartily. "It's but a poor word for him. To my thinking, there isn't his like in the counthry, let alone the

children round us, an' he's that clever, there's no bein' up to him,—the darlint!"

There is no knowing to what lengths of imbecile worship Mrs. Desmond and her nurse might presently have got, but that the nursery door opening at this moment compels the former to raise her eyes from the all-engrossing baby.

"Ah! A happy Christmas to you, Bridget," she says, gayly, seeing it is her own maid who has entered. She is a tall, handsome, rather peculiar-looking girl, with deep earnest eyes and a firm mouth. Just now she is ghastly pale, and her eyes shift a little beneath her mistress's friendly gaze.

"Thank you, ma'am," she says, in a low voice, but the usual kindly return—"an' the same to you, ma'am, an' plenty of them"—is not added.

Nurse having taken up her young gentleman and carried him over to the fire, with a view to preparing him for his morning's amusement,—namely, his bath,—Mrs. Desmond is at leisure to regard the girl with closer attention. Her pallor, the purple rims beneath her eyes, that speak of a night spent in unhappy vigil, not unbedewed by tears, awake vague suspicions in her mind, and a desire to administer consolation if possible.

Bridget has gone to the window, and is now standing there silent, gazing upon the laurustinus and the laurels drooping beneath their load of snow.

"What is it, Bridget?" asks her mistress, gently, touching her arm. "Is it any trouble?"

"Throuble!" says the girl, quickly, facing round with some vehemence, whilst a dull red flashes into her pale cheeks. Then, in an instant, she calms her evident agitation by a violent effort, and with downcast eyes says, respectfully, "You are very kind to ask me, ma'am, but—what throuble should there be wid me?"

As a rule, she speaks excellent English,—as most Irish servants of the better class can,—but in moments of strong excitement she slips into the old soft guttural style again.

"None, I hope," says Monica, very kindly. She is one of those women who think it by no means derogatory to their dignity to feel an open and expressed sympathy with the weals and woes of their domestics. This girl Bridget is regarded by her with special favor, having been her maid before her marriage, and her faithful attendant since.

"There is none,—none at all," says the girl, with nervous eagerness.

"I am glad of that: I feared"—looking at her earnestly—"there might be something about—Con—to make you unhappy."

A subdued expression of fear creeps into the girl's eyes, and she recoils a little.

"There is nothing, indeed!" she says, with unnecessary force. "What should there be? I'm sure"—with a miserable attempt at a smile—"'Tis Con himself, ma'am, would be proud to think ye'd take the thought to ask afther him."

At first Mrs. Desmond had been inclined to think a lover's quarrel was the cause of the girl's changed appearance, but some instinct tells her that those colorless cheeks have not been born of love's wounds. Bridget has half turned away, but yet Monica lingers. Then—

"Come to me, if I can ever be of use to you," she says, softly, and, having again caressed her baby, goes back in a somewhat thoughtful mood to the warmth of her own fire.

Twenty minutes later still finds her standing before it, gazing into its depths, conjuring up from it happy thoughts. Bridget and her white face are forgotten: Brian and his last tender speech are full in her mind. She is beginning to wonder what gift he has in store for her this Christmas morning, and whether he will be pleased with what she has for him, when a sound upon the threshold wakes her effectually from her pleasant day-dreams.

The door is open. Just within it stands Bridget, regarding her mistress silently, fearfully. As their eyes meet, she stirs into life, and, entering the apartment with a determined step, turns and locks the door deliberately behind her.

"Bridget, something has happened," says Monica, going quickly up to her.

For all answer the girl falls upon her knees at her feet, and, clasping her white dressing-gown, looks into her eyes as though she would read her very soul.

Her face was pale a few minutes since, but now it is positively haggard, and large blue veins stand out prominently upon her forehead. Her eyes are wild, her lips parted and quite bloodless.

"Bridget!" exclaims Mrs. Desmond, nervously, laying her own upon the girl's right hand as it clutches her gown.

"I must speak," says Bridget, in a low hoarse voice; "though they kill me for it, I must. It has been like a raging fire in my veins during all the dark and terrible hours of this past night. An' when ye spoke to me awhile ago—— Miss Monica, listen to me." (Her mistress is always "Miss Monica" to her, as in the old days, in spite of the baby in the nursery beyond, and the general impropriety of it.)

"Say what you will to me," says Monica, gently.

"Ay, ay, but how to say it? I tell ye I have come here

this mornin' to give my life into yer hands. An' more,—*far more,*"—throwing out her arms with a passionate gesture: "I am goin' to give ye the life of him I love!"

She covers her eyes for a moment, and then looks up again, a terrible calm upon her face.

"Swear to me," she says, "by the heaven above us both, that, as I hope to save the man you love to-night, you will save mine, if ever the power to do it lies wid ye."

"What horrible thing are you going to tell me?" says Monica, faintly, recoiling from her. It is noticeable, however, that, though she does recoil, she still shows no smallest inclination to ring the bell that is almost at her hand, and summon assistance.

"Horrible, by my faith, it will be if it succeeds," says the girl, violently; "but you have not sworn yet."

Monica hesitates. It is not, however, a time to distrust warnings of brutal deeds, or treat them as theatrical effects: the hesitation is barely perceptible before it dies away.

"I swear to help you in your extremity, as you will help me in mine," she says, slowly, her eyes upon the girl's.

"It is an oath," says the latter, quickly. "The throuble of him I love will be *my* throuble; an' so ye have pledged yerself to help us both."

"It is Con?" says Monica, with a curious change of feature.

"Ay, 'tis so," says the girl, in a voice of the most intense anguish, rocking herself to and fro, with her arms clasped across her bosom. "He's in it too. Them divils who preach of good to be got from fire an' blood caught a hoult of him awhile past, an' now he's in the thick of it. There's mischief to you an' yours brewin' by night an' day for weeks past, an' now it has come to a head. I tell ye,"—crawling even closer to her, and staring at her with horrified eyes,—"there's murther in the very air ye're breathin'. Last night——"

Still grasping her mistress's robe, she looks shudderingly around her, and her tone sinks to a whisper.

"Yes,—last night—" says Monica, bending over her.

"I stole through the frost an' the snow to the cabin where I knew they held their meetin's, and I put my ear to the hole in the window, an' listened, and first I heard —niver mind what,—I won't tell ye that, but I heard of many evil deeds yet to be done, and at last—*at last,*" smiting her breast, "of one that pierced my heart as I listened. It was—— Hist! was that a step beyant?" She cowers at Monica's feet, and again tightens her clasp upon her gown, and points in a frenzied fashion towards the door.

"No, there is nobody. Go on, go on: it was——"

"It was what ye're thinkin'," says the girl, solemnly. "To-night they are to come in a body to this house, and the doors are to be opened to them by one inside its walls, an' then——"

She pauses. The pause is ominous.

"Inside these walls! You would tell me that one of our own people would betray us? I will not believe it," says Mrs. Desmond, growing deadly white. For the first time her self-possession fails her. Detaching the girl's hand from her dressing-gown, she walks rapidly in an agitated fashion up and down the room. "It cannot be true," she says; "I have so trusted them all! What one in our service can speak of anything but kindness shown? It *cannot* be true."

"It *is* thrue," says Bridget, sullenly, who also has risen to her feet. "Led away, like many another, by false words an' falser hopes, there is one within yer walls who is willin' an' ready to bethray ye. Yet the tool is not so bad as him that handles it. I tell ye that the very one that now is consentin' to yer death, only two years ago would have shrunk from the sight of blood. May our Blessed Lady in Heaven," cries the girl, flinging her arms above her head, and lifting her flashing eyes to the sky without, "rain down deadly curses upon those black-hearted villains who have led our lads asthray!"

As though a little exhausted by her vehemence, her arms sink slowly to her sides again, and her head falls in a dejected fashion on her breast.

"Who is this traitor who would open our doors?" asks Monica, coldly.

"I cannot tell ye that. I will not," says the girl. "I have delivered myself an' him I love into yer hands, on the faith of yer oath. But more I will not do. If harm comes to Con of this mornin's work, I'll kill meself before yer eyes, and then ye will have two deaths, not one, upon yer soul."

Then her defiant mood changes, and she bursts into tears.

"Oh, don't be angered wid me, asthore," she says, weeping bitterly. "What can I do at all at all? But I tell ye again, be warned in time; make plans to save yerself an' them ye love while yet 'tis aisy to ye. But be sacret! an' reminber always," with subdued vehemence, and a terrible intensity upon her pale, haggard, but resolute face, "that my life is in yer keepin'. If the boys once suspected me of this day's work, they'd think as little of slittin' my throat as if I were a dog! The lightest word ye utther may be heard, an' be the signal for my death."

"I shall speak no word that will do you harm," says Monica, steadily. "But you have not yet told me all. When the doors are opened, what then?"

"The ould masther—The Desmond himself—is to be murdhered in his bed, an'—an' any one else that interferes wid the doin' of that deed. Then the house is to be burned, an' made a bonfire of, to show the counthry round what power is wid 'the boys,' an' how they will make an example of them as goes agin Parnell an' his laws; thim that thry to escape by door or window will have a hard time wid the rabble awaitin' them widout, an' thim that don't will be burnt alive. Ye hear me," says the girl, recklessly: "I've tould ye all. See to it."

She wipes her damp brow as she ceases speaking.

"To-night!" says Monica, in a faint whisper; "to-night!"

There are but eight policemen when all is told in Rossmoyne, and the troops, by order of a beneficent government, were removed from Clontree some months ago. Eight men! What would they be among so many?

"So soon!" she says again, in a terrified voice. And then, "The child, Bridget,—the child," she says: "what is to be done with him?"

"Send him down to the ould ladies below,—to Moyne House," says Bridget, eagerly. "I have thought of all that. Nurse can take him. It will not seem sthrange that he should go to them, bein' Christmas day."

"Christmas day!" Monica repeats the words after her, as though suddenly struck anew by the fact that the holy season has come. For the time being she had forgotten it, but now once again the bells far down below ring loud and clear in her ears, breathing of love, and holiness, and a world redeemed.

"Peace on earth! Good will towards men!"—"Peace!"—"Good will!" What a mockery lies in these lovely words, when coupled with those to which she has just been listening!

"Alas, alas for our unhappy land!" she says, aloud, with much bitterness of spirit.

"Don't waste yer time over that. See to what can be done," says the girl, roughly but sensibly. "There isn't much time. Ye'll—ye'll tell the masther, I don't doubt?"

"Yes, he must be told at once," says Monica. "As you say, there is very little time."

"He'll be for sendin' for the police," says the girl, with a strong shudder; "an' Con——"

"I'm afraid he won't. The Squire won't hear of protection of any sort," says Monica, miserably. "But I must try my best, Bridget," turning to her abruptly. "If you

are so afraid for your sweetheart's safety, why don't you give him warning to be absent to-night?"

"I daren't," says the girl, shrinking back. "I would rather trust to you than that. You must save him, if the worst comes to the worst. If I were to tell him all I have done to-day, he would be the first to turn from me, to hold up the finger of scorn agin me, to call me 'informer'! It would be the bitther hour for me. No, no," wringing her hands, "I can do nothing, nothing! But I can at laste prevent him from havin' murdher on his sowl. I am riskin' my all to stand betwixt him an' that!"

"Was it this regard for his soul, then, that alone prompted you to give me timely warning?" asks her mistress, somewhat sternly.

"No, no, darlin'; you must not think so bad of me as that," says the unhappy girl, breaking into fresh tears. "How can ye spake to me like that? Think—think, asthore! how strong love is, an' yet am I not betrayin' mine for yer sake? I would not, in truth, have him sin, if I could help it; but if all the sins on earth were on his shouldhers, I would not change him for another; I would still love him, wid all me heart an' sowl. So ye see, dear, don't ye now?"—sobbing bitterly,—"that it isn't all for him and meself I do this thing."

"Yes, yes. I see; I have wronged you," says Monica, with a heavy sigh. "But now help me to dress, Bridget,—quick,—quick: I must speak to the Squire at once."

"Ye won't bethray me!" says the girl, turning pale.

"You have my word," says Monica, making a hasty toilet. She runs down-stairs to the breakfast-room, fearing it might create suspicion were she to summon The Desmond to her own room.

Here she finds them all assembled, with Dicky Browne, who has run across to them again for the Christmas-tide, and who is just now squabbling with extraordinary vigor with Kit over a huge box that has come by post, the possession of which is desired by both. It need hardly be said that Mr. Browne hasn't the smallest claim to it.

"Why, breakfast is over, you lazy little thing," says her husband, as she enters. "Here, come and warm your little paws—you look frozen—while Kit pours you out some tea."

She controls herself so far as to take the tea offered with a tender kiss by Kit, and a wish that her Christmas may be a happy one; which last nearly reduces her to tears, knowing what she does.

Presently she manages to get Brian out of the room, and up-stairs, when she at once declares to him all Bridget had told her. At first, man like, he is prepared to pooh-pooh the whole thing, but Bridget herself, being got in (and

having consented to let Brian also into her confidence), by the very terrible eagerness of her words and manner carries him away with her, and proves to him beyond a doubt that a very serious conspiracy is on foot.

"George"—alluding to The Desmond—"must be told of this at once," says Brian, with a heavy frown, his blue eyes dark with anger. "The dastardly villains! to come in round numbers, armed to the teeth, to take the life of one old man! But they shall have their lesson."

"Do you think Uncle George will employ the police this time?" asks Monica, nervously. As she asks this, Bridget bends eagerly forward to hear the answer.

"I think it unlikely. He has so persistently and for so long declined protection of any sort that he is almost certain to refuse it now."

A gleam of passionate relief passes over the girl's face. To have her lover cast into the hands of an irate landlord is to her nothing when compared to his being seized by the iron grasp of the law; and then there is always Monica's oath.

"Uncle George must be told, indeed, and as soon as possible," says Monica. "Will you tell him, Brian?"

"Yes; but come with me," says Desmond, who in truth rather dreads The Desmond's explosions.

"Oh, yes, of course," says poor Monica, trying to look as if she is rather pleased with the idea of the coming interview than otherwise.

CHAPTER XIX.

"Thine owen Squier and thy boren man
Intendeth for to do thee villainy:
God grante thee thine homely foe t'espy.
For in this world is no worse pestilence
Than homely foe all day in thy presence."

He has been told: it is all over,—even the first wrathful imprecations, the disbeliefs, the angry certainties. The Desmond is now as convinced of the reality of the conspiracy as Monica herself.

"Only what I have prognosticated for over a year!" he says, with great force, exactly five minutes after he has declared the whole thing to be an absurd fabrication. "Insolent creatures! Bloodthirsty villains! But I'll be even with them yet." All this time he is stamping up and down the room. "I'll read them a lesson they shan't forget in a

hurry. I'll pay them off in their own coin. See if I don't."

"Yes, yes, just so," says Brian, quickly; "but let us now decide how the paying off is to be accomplished."

They are all in the library,—Monica, Kit, the uncle and nephew, and Dicky Browne,—and are all more or less in a high state of excitement.

"Shall we, or shall we not, this time call for the interference of the police?" asks Brian.

"The police! Never! D'ye think I'd let those miscreants think I was afraid of them?" roars The Desmond, indignantly, like an enraged lion. "*Never*, I tell you! I'll fight the whole beggarly crew, single-handed, and defy them to the last gasp, though you should all flee from me."

Of course, after this no more is said about the belted gentlemen.

"Very well: that is one point decided," says Brian, who, to tell the truth, is secretly glad of the decision. "Monica and Kit can go down to Moyne."

"I will not," says Monica, promptly.

"You won't?" says her husband, a trifle staggered by this open disobedience.

"Certainly not," says Mrs. Desmond.

"Monica!" says Brian, in a distinctly cowed tone, that utterly destroys his puerile attempt at authority.

"She is quite right," says Kit, sturdily. "Neither shall I. I shan't stir a step out of this house for any one. Say I shan't, Uncle George."

To Kit, as well as to Monica, The Desmond is always Uncle George.

"Not unless you wish it, my dear," says the old gentleman, who quite revels in a row himself, and is most generously anxious that every one else should enjoy it too. His passion of a moment since is gone, and his face is wreathed in smiles, as he bends it upon Kit. He is, in fact, looking quite twenty years younger since the prospect of the coming fracas was presented to him. "Tut! what folly, Brian! as if we three should not be a match for any amount of those ignorant bumpkins! Let the girls share the fun. Why, in my time there were girls who could fire off a gun and kill their man with the best shot in the country. That was in the time of the White Boys. Eh! eh! but those were good old days!"

"I'm glad *somebody* understands us," says Monica, directing a withering glance at Brian, who smiles as he receives it, as if amused.

"So be it," he says, shrugging his shoulders. "I never fight against too great odds."

"Faith, then, I think you will to-night, my boy," says

The Desmond, laughing jovially. "But we'll lick 'em for all that. I only hope"—with the first touch of fear that has come to him since Bridget's tale was told—"that the story you tell me is *true!*"

"I believe it firmly," says Brian.

"Why can't I be told the source from which it comes?" asks The Desmond, in an aggrieved tone.

"I am bound in honor not to disclose it," says Monica, gently. "Some day, dear Uncle George, you shall know all; but you must take my word for it now."

"A very good word," says The Desmond, with affectionate courtesy.

"When is the attack to be made?" asks Dicky Browne.

"At two o'clock to-night," returns Monica, in a low tone, looking nervously round her, although the library door is firmly closed and there is no place of concealment in the room.

"A good hour," says The Desmond. "And so they hope to murder me in my bed, and then set fire to my house, do they? Well, to-morrow they will be wiser."

"It will be unsafe to let the servants know of our suspicions until it is too late for them to warn any one connected with this intended outrage," says Brian. "Let us make no mistakes. If the story be true at all, one of our people in the house is disaffected, and would therefore at once convey a warning to his comrades, if he heard we had even an inkling of this affair. Secrecy is imperative; yet"—thoughtfully—"we must have help."

"Nothing simpler," says Dicky Browne. "It's Christmas day. A dinner-party, therefore, might reasonably be expected even by the most suspicious of domestics. Let us ask every available good shot in the neighborhood to dinner, and in this way make up a regular army to meet our noble assailants. Let us invite our army not only to dine, but to sleep; and let us give them to understand beforehand what is expected of them, so that they may not come empty-handed so far as bullets and revolvers are concerned. The servants need know nothing of the sleeping-arrangement until the last moment,—no fellow will want a comfortable shake-down with the prospect of so much fun before him, and indeed"—brilliantly—"why should the servants know at all? Why shouldn't we steal a march upon them, and so bring to book the guilty one among them? By so doing, and setting a watch, we might find out the real offender."

"We shall find him out without that," says Brian, in a significant tone, and with a short laugh.

"Eh?" says The Desmond, sharply.

But his nephew refuses to hear him.

"The servants must be told sooner or later," he says. "And we can make it just sufficiently later to prevent any warning being sent to our expected foes. Quite at the very last we will be open. Too much secrecy defeats its own ends. Let us be above-board when we must."

"Brian! what a disgraceful sentiment!" says Kit, with a little laugh.

"Now, now, let us arrange our army," says Monica, impatiently.

"Clontarf will come, and Burke, and"—looking round doubtfully—"Sir Watkyn, perhaps."

Sir Watkyn Wylde is again at Kilmalooda.

"Oh, don't drag that poor young thing into our broils," says Mr. Browne, with deep feeling. "Consider his tender years."

"Nevertheless I'll ask him," says Brian, with an amused glance. "A stray bullet may rid us of him forever! If I suggest that hope to Clontarf, he will bring him here by force. And, besides, he *must* be asked: it would instantly create suspicion if Clontarf came here without his guest."

"He'll refuse," says Dicky. "Youth and timidity always go together."

"Then there is Brabazon. He is staying at Lislee. He came there yesterday: we may surely count on him."

"Neil!" says Monica, involuntarily, blushing scarlet. She remembers her last private interview with him, and wonders whether he will bring himself so far to condone her conduct then as to give her his help now in her pressing need!

"Yes, Neil," says Kit, softly. "He will come, I know."

"No doubt," says Dicky: "'wheresoever the carcass is——'"

"Do you mean to call *me* a carcass?" says Miss Beresford, who alone has overheard this sally, making a covert attempt to do him some personal injury, which by a cowardly ducking he avoids. Indeed, both he and she are shamelessly unimpressed by the importance of the impending outrage.

"Priscilla and Penelope Blake are coming to dinner," says The Desmond, thoughtfully. "It will be better the child and his nurse should return with them to Moyne than go earlier in the day. The least act may lead to suspicion. When they have gone, I should like to call up the servants and let them know what we have heard. If we once get them all together into the hall, we can easily keep them under our supervision afterwards, and so prevent their giving warning to their accomplices outside."

"But then how shall we discover the in-door traitor,—our black sheep?" asks Dicky.

"I have thought of that," says Brian, quickly. "George is right. We shall get the servants up, and once we have them all together we can arrange so as not to lose sight of them again. We can see the doors secured and the keys delivered up. But if any one in the house is determined upon betraying us, locked doors will not prevent their doing it. The library windows, as we all know, are conveniently near the ground, and conveniently far from the sleeping-apartments. Let us give them all to understand that we shall set a watch only on the north and south sides of the house, that command the avenue and back entrance alone."

"You would then set a secret guard over the library?"

"Yes."

"And supposing our unknown traitor failed to put in an appearance there?"

"Then no harm will be done. There is no other room by which he could make his escape, once the north and south wings are secured. And I think he *will* appear. A desperate man will brave a good deal. And the case will be desperate with him, if he leads his companions in villany into an unexpected net."

"It is a very good plan, but it makes me feel that I am betraying somebody in my turn," says The Desmond, gloomily. "And, after all, this story you tell me of should be, in my opinion, taken with innumerable grains of salt."

"You doubt it," says Kit, quickly. "But I don't: no one could. Why, it stands to reason that it must be true."

"I agree with you," says Mr. Browne, genially. "I'm chokeful of reason: I'm the most reasonable person in the world: so I hope some one will stand to me! You may, Kit, as close as ever you like," says Mr. Browne, with overwhelming cordiality: "*I* shan't mind!"

"You are a very silly person, Dicky," says Miss Beresford, with an unmistakable flout.

"It is half-past eleven," says Monica, suddenly glancing at the clock. "The church bell will begin to ring in a minute or two. And we must go to church to-day, whatever happens. They"—by this time the servants have lost their personalities and become mere pronouns—"will notice it, if we stay at home."

"'We *are* a happy family,—we are—we are,'" says Mr. Browne, tearfully.

"I don't feel as if I could go to church: I know I couldn't feel grateful," says Kit, with a mutinous glance.

"Nevertheless, come, if only to keep up appearances."

"Yes, Monica is right. No matter how great a grind it may be, considering the disturbed state of our minds, still we ought to go," says The Desmond, gently.

"We *will* go," declares Mr. Browne, valiantly. "Though the deluge or the crack of doom await us at nightfall, still we'll go. Oh, why isn't Mannering here? Dear fellow, so full of pluck and energy as he was, how he would have enjoyed it. Eh, Kit?"

"After service, Brian, you can call upon Clontarf, and tell him how the land lies," says The Desmond.

"I shall get him to bring Burke and Brabazon," says Brian. "It will lessen gossip."

"A very wise thought," returns The Desmond; after which they all fall off to prepare for church, with what religious feeling they may.

CHAPTER XX.

"Said I not well? Can I not speak in terme
But well I wot, thou dost mine heart to erne
That I have almost caught a cardiacle."

"AH! is it you? A happy Christmas to you," says Lady Clontarf, with her friendliest smile, as Brian Desmond enters her drawing-room three hours later. "It is quite an ideal Christmas, is it not,—with all this frost and snow and ice, and a sun that is almost warm?"

"It is a charming day."

"You want Donat? He is out, I think, somewhere about the grounds. But a messenger can find him. I dare say he is——"

As she speaks, the door opens, and Donat himself enters, and after a few minutes is in full possession of all that has taken place.

"You will come and help us?" says Brian.

"Yes, of course I shall. What an adventure! What a sell it will prove for those brutes!"

"If all goes well, and our plans do not transpire. But we shall have to be very cautious. The Squire, I need hardly say, is in a sort of seventh heaven of pleasurable excitement. But what of Burke and Brabazon?"

"Gerald Burke is to dine here to-day. I can bring him with me to Coole, without creating any comment."

"And Brabazon?"

"I'll secure him for you, too. It is better I should go to him than you. This Land League business is such a universal affair that your movements are sure to be watched. Leave Brabazon to me."

"It is fourteen miles there, and fourteen back," says Brian. "It is very good of you to make the offer."

"My dear fellow, you have provided me with a positive excitement! What reward do you not deserve? Pray consider we are quits, whatever I may do for you. And, now, is there anything else?"

"We are rather short of revolvers," says Brian. "Dicky Browne has one, but his man hasn't, and we have only two altogether. Can you bring, or let me take, one or two?"

"Three, if you like. You will find two in my own den down-stairs, and——Can you tell me where the other is?" asks Clontarf, turning suddenly towards his wife.

"I do not know, indeed." When Brian had commenced his story, she had stood and listened to him, but when it was over, and Clontarf had pledged himself to help him, she had turned abruptly away, and had withdrawn herself within the folds of the window-curtains. Her voice now sounds strained, and purposely indifferent.

"Well, it must be up-stairs," says Clontarf. "Run down to my room, Brian, and see about the other two, whilst I hunt up the third: it wouldn't do, of course, to send the servants in quest of any of them."

Before he has finished speaking, Brian is sped on his mission, leaving him standing in the middle of the room, thoughtfully frowning over the whereabouts of the missing weapon. He has almost forgotten the silent figure behind the curtains, until her voice strikes upon his ear.

"You will not go?" she says.

She has come out from the curtains now, and is standing opposite to him, with her eyes fixed upon his face, and her hand upon the back of a chair, as though to support herself. She is indeed so deadly pale as to suggest the idea of support being necessary; her lips are trembling and apart; yet her voice is steady, and her glance unwavering.

"Not go! Of course I shall go," says Clontarf, very much amazed by her manner, and in truth rather at sea as to the meaning of it.

"You *shall* not!" she says, with increasing vehemence, coming closer to him. "You—you cannot."

"But why? I do not——"

"There will be danger there, perhaps death!" interrupts she, with growing agitation.

"It is because there will, no doubt, be danger, that I am going: why should I go if there wasn't danger? As for death, I don't believe in that."

"I do! See how determined these peasants have been up to this,—how many lives they have taken. There will be bad work at Coole to-night."

"And is that why I should refuse to go there?" asks he, contemptuously. "Is that your idea of the rights of friend-

ship? To give assistance in time of need to one's friends, should be a sacred duty."

"There are even higher duties than those imposed by friendship. And why should they demand your help at Coole? Where are the police? What are they for, but to protect the landlords, and keep order, and——"

"You heard what Desmond said about that: his uncle will have nothing to do with the police. He will not give his tenants the satisfaction of saying they drove him to procure extraneous assistance."

"And is it right that he should so decide?" demands she, coming even nearer to him, with her beautiful face the color of death, and her eyes aflame. "Is it just? How does he dare endanger the lives of his so-called friends for the sake of a whim,—a mere caprice,—an affectation of bravery!"

"Right or wrong, I shall of course go," says Clontarf, but without looking at her.

"Your mind is quite made up?"

"Quite."

For a second after this she remains motionless, still with her hand upon the chair. Then she turns away from him, and goes back to the window, and stands there gazing out upon the wintry landscape.

Prompted by some hidden impulse, Clontarf follows her.

"Your manner," he says, with an uneasy laugh, "leads me to imagine that you think I am about to do you some actual injury. It would, indeed, almost compel me (were I any one else) to believe you are—are—*anxious* for my safety."

The suppressed astonishment in his tone wounds her deeply. Her face is turned from him, but something in the way she had walked to the window—something in the abruptness of her haste to avoid his glance—had led him to the belief that her eyes might be full of tears.

Now, as she moves her position and faces him again, he sees he was mistaken in his conjecture. The eyes that look at him—with something that is very like anger in their clear depths—are dry and bright and fearless. Her face, too, though still colorless, is now calm, and without passion.

"One is bound to feel some natural anxiety about any case in which life is threatened," she says, coldly.

"Life threatened is not life destroyed. Your 'natural anxiety' need not be much exercised on this occasion, as I believe there will be little or no danger."

"There you must let me disagree with you."

"At least there will be an equal chance for life and death. And equality is as much as any man can desire."

"To-night the chances will not be equal."

"Nonsense! as if four or five of us would not be equal to a small regiment of those untrained curs. But even if it weren't so, if"—he glances at her curiously—"my death should be the result of to-night's work—would that distress you?"

"Yes, it would distress me." There is no quaver in her voice as she says this, and her eyes do not droop before his. Clontarf laughs.

"I should have thought it would be a relief to you," he says, with a light sneer.

"Then you wronged me," returns she, icily.

"Why should I not think it?" exclaims he, with sudden animation. "My death would restore to you your freedom, and sweep from your path an incubus."

He smiles indifferently as he says this, though he is in truth regarding her very keenly.

They are cruel words,—purposely cruel,—and a hot and painful flush springing to her pale cheeks dyes them crimson. She shrinks from him. Then the color fades again, and her lips take a disdainful curve.

"Is that how *you* would feel about *my* death?" she says, slowly.

Something in her face shocks him, and wakens him to the enormity of the words he has just uttered.

"No, no! How could you think it! How could you accuse me of such a horrible thing?" he says, with vehement denial.

"You accused me of it," returns she, gently.

Then, Brian Desmond returning to the room, she leaves the window, and goes to meet him. The sweetness of her manner is perhaps a little premeditated, as she lays her hand upon his arm and looks up smiling into his face.

"Donat is going to you. But—but you have not yet asked me?" she says,—oh, so graciously! "May I not too be a witness of to-night's triumph?"

"It is impossible," says Clontarf, with a frown, coming quickly forward. The frown is born of fear, not of anger.

"Nothing is impossible: there is no such word, is there, Mr. Desmond?" says Doris, still with her hand on Brian's arm, and still smiling. "You will accept me as your guest for to-night—is it not?"

"There is no real danger, I am sure," says Brian, stammering a little, not knowing how to decide between the two. "I should not let Monica remain with me, if I honestly believed there was—and——"

"Monica will stay at Coole to-night?" asks Doris, quickly.

"Yes; and Kit."

"Ah! and add me too."

"If you will come, and if Clontarf does not object," says Brian, looking at Donat.

"Never mind who objects. I offer myself to you as a guest. You cannot be inhospitable enough to refuse me shelter," says Doris, playfully, though her eyes are singularly devoid of mirth.

"Is it arranged, Clontarf?" asks Brian, laughing.

"So it seems," returns Donat, with a slight shrug.

"I shan't bring Vera, or—or that old man, Sir Watkyn," says Doris, who now seems to have entered, with an eagerness that borders on excitement, into the spirit of the adventure. "We can explain all that by saying some one should remain at home to look after my aunt. Vera and Sir Watkyn can minister to her," with a faint smile.

"I'm afraid you don't like the arrangement," says Brian, seeing Clontarf's face is still moody. "But indeed there will be no danger. Would I keep Monica at Coole, if I had a doubt as to the successful termination of this little affair? and if Lady Clontarf will come it will be a great help to us. Don't you see, if you came to us on Christmas night without her, they would either smell a rat as regards our plans, or else"—laughing gayly—"would imagine you and she were not living on very affectionate terms!"

Tableau! Desmond's playful remark fails to call forth any mirth in his listeners. Dismal silence follows on it. If, indeed, a small thunderbolt had fallen in their midst, Lord and Lady Clontarf could not have looked more disconcerted.

"Yes, yes; I shall certainly go," says Doris, confusedly, whilst her husband, muttering something about the third revolver, makes his escape from the room.

Their plans are, so far, successful. Clontarf's long ride to Gerald Burke's house, and from that to Lislee, where Neil Brabazon is staying, produce the desired results, so that at seven o'clock the Kilmalooda carriage brings to Coole all those I have just named, and with them Lady Clontarf. Vera had been easily persuaded to stay at home and look after Sir Watkyn and Mrs. Costello. A little hint had been given her as to the real meaning of the Coole dinner-party, after which no persuasion had been necessary at all.

Doris, running up to Monica's room on her arrival, and there falling into a little whispered conversation with her, that presently lengthens into a settled discussion, is devoutly blessed by Kit, who has been dressed for fully half an hour, and has been standing at her window, that overlooks the avenue, with her pretty nose cruelly flattened against the pane, waiting for somebody.

When at last "somebody" comes, she is in the hall to

"You will take in Kit," she says to him; and then, in a low voice and very sweetly, "It was so good of you to come."

It must be confessed she sighs as she says this, and casts a regretful thought after the Mannering supplies; but Brabazon is jubilant, and, seeing him a few minutes later seated by Kit, and looking at her with such an honest worship in his eyes as should touch the heart of any one, her sighs grow less, and it occurs to her that perhaps no Mannering born could ever look like that, and that there are better things than thousands.

The dinner is a great success. Every one, strange to say, is in the wildest spirits. Never has The Desmond been so full of joyous repartee; never has Lady Clontarf shown herself so altogether gay and girlish and light-hearted. Whether it is the knowledge of a coming excitement, and the being unable to discuss it publicly, or the dear delight that lies in the possession of an important secret, who can say? But certain it is that their mirth is augmented rather than checked by the fact that a dangerous adventure lies before them, in which they must perforce bear a part.

Brian is perhaps a little thoughtful. He does not talk much, and indeed seems rapt in a mild contemplation of the footman (Connor), whose every expression and movement seems to afford him a subdued pleasure. It is so subdued that the footman himself is unaware of it.

And Gerald Burke, too, is rather silent. But then Vera's absence is sufficient to account for that; and, besides, is he not always a silent man? Once, however, during dinner he comes out of his abstraction and betrays life enough. He has happened to fix his eyes on Lady Clontarf,—dark, melancholy, but very beautiful eyes,—when it so happens that a break occurs in the general conversation.

"I wonder what Vera is doing now," says Lady Clontarf, suddenly, the momentary silence making her voice distinctly heard by all.

"*I* know," says Dicky Browne, promptly. "She is just now smiling into the eyes of her ancient adorer as she alone knows how to smile. Happy Sir Watkyn!" sentimentally. "He has her all to himself for this one night at least!"

Burke, as though shot, raises his head at this and looks straight at the speaker. A dark flush has dyed his forehead, his nostrils dilate, his soft dreamy eyes blaze with a passionate light. The beauty of his whole face is marred for the instant by an expression that is almost devilish.

Then it all dies away. The flush fades, the features resettle themselves into their old lines, the eyes are lowered. Almost as quickly as it was born the evil look vanishes, but yet not before a few have seen and marked it.

"Do you know," says Brabazon, in a low tone, turning to Kit,—who, as I have said, is sitting next him, openly happy in the thought that her own true love has been in a measure restored to her,—"though Burke is the gentlest-mannered fellow I know,—soft as a woman in his glance and touch and his low sweet voice,—still I shouldn't care to be the one to cross him either in love or war? Did you see his eyes just then?"

"There was madness in them," says Kit, with a shudder. "He is terribly in love with Vera, but it is so strange a love that it would frighten me."

"It doesn't frighten her. She plays with him, as a cat might with a mouse."

"She doesn't understand him. Some day she will have to wake to the fact that *she* is the mouse. She loves him nevertheless, I think, and I am sure she means some day to marry him. In the mean time, I wish she would not rouse his jealousy as she does."

"Tell you what it is," says Mr. Browne, who is sitting at her other side; "if she carries on her little joke with Sir Watkyn much farther, that good old man will find himself exterminated one of these fine days. And then what on earth will become of us all?"

Now dinner is over, and ten o'clock has struck, and the Misses Blake's carriage has been announced as ready to convey them back to Moyne. Unless on a very rare occasion, the Misses Blake abstain from lusts in the shape of late hours.

To-night they are departing in a perfect flutter of pride and delight in that the "darling child" is to be intrusted to their tender keeping for two whole days. "For change of air," according to Monica, who had rather faltered over this fib. But she had been innocently believed by her aunts, who are too happy in the immediate possession of their grand-nephew to question any statement that gives him to them: followed by the astonished nurse, they step into their brougham.

"Good-night, my dear child," they call out to Monica, in hushed but blissful tones, lest they should wake the sleeping cherub; and, Monica having pressed a last kiss upon her pretty boy, with a lingering tenderness and a very pale little face, the carriage rolls away up the dark avenue, and presently even the sound of the departing wheels is lost in the moaning of the wintry night wind, as it rushes through the leafless limes and flies across the valley down below.

CHAPTER XXI.

"Alas! a foul thing is it, by my faith,
To say this word, and fouler is the deed."

"Now comes the tug of war," says Dicky Browne, in a half-whisper, bending over Lady Clontarf.

The hall, which is of very grand proportions, is ablaze with light. The servants, at the lower end, are all assembled, looking for the most part unconcerned. Being Christmas night, it seems to them a natural thing that they should be summoned to their master's presence, to hear a few kindly words addressed to them by him, and to receive some hearty expressions of his good will.

At the upper end of the hall The Desmond and his guests are sitting, or standing, round a huge wood fire, that sends a streaming light across the polished floor, that shines like glass beneath its ruddy rays.

Lady Clontarf and Monica, in their pretty evening gowns, are sitting together on a fur-covered lounge, the firelight playing mad pranks with the jewels that cover their fingers, and dancing in and out of the folds of their satins and laces. Kit and Brabazon are standing just behind them, their hands surreptitiously clasped under cover of their unconscious backs. The others are scattered about here and there,—The Desmond standing, however, prominently forward, facing his people.

As the last servant takes his place, a deadly silence falls upon all those assembled,—a silence so heavy as to be felt and broken only by the roar of the glorious logs, as the flames rush tumultuously up the chimney.

At last The Desmond breaks it. Moving a few steps nearer to them, he reveals to his household in a speech—short, indeed, but very explicit—the plot against his life that had reached his ears that morning. In a few words, devoid of excitement, passion, and reproach, yet somehow subtly redolent of all three, he details to them this vile treachery that has disturbed his faith in them.

"Who it is, who has decided upon opening my doors and giving me to death, I know not," says The Desmond, in a clear, calm voice, "or even who it is that has righteously seen fit to destroy this murderous plan by secret denunciation of it."

He pauses as he says this, and involuntarily Monica glances at Bridget. Any emotion on her part at this mo-

ment will be fatal, supposing the traitor to be present to mark it. But the girl's eyes are downcast, and her face still and immovable as though carved in stone. The lamps, pale but brilliant, are lighting up her emotionless features with such vividness that the faintest twitch would be noticeable. But no sign betrays her.

"I know nothing beyond the bare fact that an attempt is to be made upon my house to-night, and that one at least of my inmates is connected with it," goes on The Desmond, in a carefully even tone. "From a source outside—a foreign source—the information I have gained has come."

When he says this, he is honestly speaking what he believes to be the truth. Afraid of his impetuosity, he has been carefully led to think that Monica's story was related to her by somebody entirely unconnected with his own household. So that no lie issues from his lips as he says the words that help to shield Bridget.

"When I look round," goes on The Desmond, slowly, though in truth he hardly removes his eyes from the butler and housekeeper, "I can hardly bring myself to believe there is within my trusted household a very Judas. But, as my information has come to me from a reliable tongue, I cannot bring myself altogether to disregard it. I shall therefore require that the keys of the house be forthwith brought to me, and that such of you as I shall choose shall go round with Mr. Desmond and see that locks are securely fastened and all windows barred. Those who are really innocent must perforce suffer with the guilty (if such there be) in this matter until the real culprit be discovered. These guests in my house, whom now you see before you," indicating by a slight wave of the hand those who are seated round the fire, "will remain at Coole to-night with the kindly intention of rendering me assistance, should it be required. I feel it to be my duty to tell you all this openly and without reservation. I shall now expect you to retire quietly to your rooms, and to take no part whatsoever in any disturbances that may take place to-night, unless specially called upon to do so. I think there is nothing more to be said."

A dead silence follows on his words. For the most part the faces of the servants express nothing except unmitigated surprise. Then the butler,—an old man, who has served him faithfully for thirty years,—breaking the ranks, steps forward.

"Master," he says, tremulously, "I have lived wid ye for more years than you or I can count, an' will ye be for disthrustin' me now?" His voice is very low, and his old eyes are wet with tears.

"No, Brady, no, no!" says The Desmond, grasping his hand and looking even more inclined to cry than he does. Somehow, all in a moment the master's mind has gone back to that sunny long ago, when he and the man now before him had been boys together. With this, too, comes the overpowering grief of being betrayed by those he had trusted, that all day long has lain heavy upon his heart, the heavier in that he has refused to give it full sway; and now here is this man appealing to him. At the moment, Brady hardly appears to him as withered and aged, but rather as the madcap boy who in the good old days went with him on many a famous birds-nesting expedition,—when the terms master and man bore to them no significance at all, and he was the better fellow who could climb the steepest cliff and carry off the eggs from the clamoring gull.

There are tears in both their eyes as they stand thus hand in hand, and the servant's lips are quivering.

"I cannot show a difference to you without insulting the rest," says The Desmond, in a low tone, heard by him alone. "Help me in this trouble, Dan, as you have helped me all my life."

The long-forgotten boyish appellation uttered now by The Desmond in his hour of need stirs the old servant's heart to fresh warmth and love.

"Ay, ay, lad; I'll do yer biddin' now and always," he says, in his soft brogue, "whatever comes of it."

"Now," says The Desmond, in a low voice, "you must all consider yourselves under suspicion until this mystery is cleared up. I forbid any one to leave this house again to-night, under any pretext whatsoever. You have my orders: see that you obey them. I will have no warning conveyed to these dastards who would come to take the lives of sleeping men."

"Look at that man down there, behind the others!" says Lady Clontarf, suddenly, laying her hand upon her husband's arm, who happens to be near her. As she speaks she points (imperceptibly to all but him) in the direction she would have his eyes follow. Looking, he sees in the background, half hidden by the women-folk, the face of a young man, pale, emaciated, but with eyes literally on fire. He is as white as death; his lips are working convulsively; his whole expression is suggestive of a diabolical disappointment.

Forgetful of observation (in the intensity of his anxiety to hear what the Squire is saying), he is leaning forward, only to learn, word by word, that ruin has seized upon his evil scheme. As the truth becomes known to him his face grows livid, and great drops of perspiration stand out upon

his brow; his eyes glow with the brilliant hateful brightness of a murderer or a maniac.

So changed is his face that Clontarf fails to recognize it.

"See, Desmond," he says to Brian, in clear, ringing tones, "is that one of your fellows down there?"

"Yes; that is Connor: don't you know him?" says Brian, with a quiet smile, his eyes upon the footman (indeed, they have never once left him since The Desmond began his speech). "He is one of our best servants, and wonderfully clever,—so useful, in fact, that I shall choose him as my escort to see about the fastening of doors and windows."

All this—though he does not raise his voice—is said in so distinct a tone that it is perfectly audible to those at the lower end of the hall.

"Why not have Brady instead?" says Monica, a little nervously; though why, she hardly knows.

"Because I'm so fond of Connor," says Brian, with a short laugh. "He is so dear to me that I can't bear to let him out of my sight."

He advances towards the footman as he speaks, and beckons him authoritatively to his side. The servants parting respectfully right and left as he draws near, the man is obliged to come forward and await his orders.

"You, Brady," says Brian, turning to the old butler, "will you go with Mr. Browne and see to the safety of the north side of the house; Connor will come with me and Lord Clontarf, to see to the other fastenings. Ready, Connor?"

"Yes, sir," says the man, with difficulty, from between his set teeth.

* * * * * * * *

"Look here, old fellow," says Brian to Lord Clontarf, about half an hour later, "you'd better go and lie down. You're looking awfully fagged, you know: remember what a ride you've had. Better have a B. and S., and go to sleep for a bit. There are"—looking at his watch—"two full hours before you can possibly be wanted."

"Nonsense! I'm all right," says Clontarf. "I'm not a bit down, and feel fit for anything at this moment."

"You will have to be fit for a good deal, I fancy, before the night is over; and you have been on hard duty all day. Dicky Browne and I can see to things for the present, and Burke and Brabazon are quite alive. There, go, do. Even one hour's oblivion will make you as fresh as a daisy, and I think there is some real fun before us. Did you mark that fellow's face? What a picture it was!"

"A very ugly one."

"A very striking one at least. Of course you know now who it is I have suspected all along. To-night will tell us

for a certainty whether my suspicions are correct. He knows I have my eye upon him, and for that reason will be the more eager to make his escape from the house, to warn his comrades. Their non-appearance after all we have heard would destroy the little evidence we have against him. Through the library window is his usual mode of exit (that I discovered). In the library, therefore,—if my belief in his treachery prove a true one,—we shall secure him to-night."

"Who is to secure him?" asks Clontarf, eagerly.

"It is as yet undecided. I wish George would go to bed," says Brian, with an impatient frown, "and leave it all to us; but he won't; and who is to manage him but me, I don't know. Burke has undertaken to keep a watch on all the other servants, except Connor (who sleeps in a separate wing), and Dicky Browne and I had decided on taking up our stand secretly in the library to intercept that fellow if he means mischief."

"You can't do it, my dear boy: you must keep your eye on the Squire, or he will spoil everything," says Clontarf. "Better let me take your place with Dicky."

"I suppose so," says Brian, regretfully; "though I can't bear letting Connor out of my sight. Donat, if you make a mistake in this affair, or by any means let him escape, I'll never forgive you."

"I'll be as careful as yourself," says Clontarf, earnestly: "you may depend upon me." Then, laughing, "It is a terrible grief to you, I know, but I am afraid you must surrender him to me for a little while. We shall let you have the earliest intimation of his capture, if it comes off. Let that console you."

"I shan't see his face when he is captured. Nothing can console me for that loss," says Brian, laughing too. "There, do be off, and get an hour's sleep, if you can."

"Where?" asks Donat, who in truth is feeling a little lazy. "Here?" pointing to a lounge.

"No, no; up-stairs. Go straight ahead, and when you come to the third door on the first corridor consider it your own."

So saying, Desmond pushes him good-naturedly out of the room.

CHAPTER XXII.

"Her breast was whole withoutë for to seen,
But in her heart aye was the arrow keen."

"For shame of him, my cheekës waxë red."

As Brian has just given orders for all lights to be extinguished in the house, and for every servant to keep his or her room unless called upon to appear, Clontarf has barely time to run up-stairs before the hall lamps are extinguished. The corridor, as he reaches it, is indeed still lit, but dimly, —only one light being left at the lower end,—so that as he comes to the desired number three he opens it quickly, and enters it in a rather precipitate fashion, fearing lest some officious hand should put out the last lamp and leave him suddenly in utter darkness outside, unable to find the room indicated, without excessive trouble and many awkward adventures.

When he has closed the door with a proprietary bang, and looked around him, he finds himself in a very pretty bedroom, and face to face with his wife!

She is sitting in a low chair before a brilliant fire, with the lights behind her somewhat lowered. She has evidently exchanged her evening gown for one more comfortable, and is now clad in a soft white clinging garment heavily trimmed with lace, the sleeves of which are so loose that falling backwards they let half her pretty arms be seen. Her eyes, as she looks up at Clontarf, are full of wonder. That she is fair he has always acknowledged, even though she "be not fair" to him; but how beautiful she can be, with that soft startled expression upon her face, up to this has been unknown to him:

"Her body, face, and hand
Be sharply slender, so that, from the head
Unto the foot, all is but womanhead."

Conquering her surprise, she recovers her self-possession gracefully, and rises to her feet. He, being the man, is much slower to recover his.

"I beg your pardon," he says, pausing on the threshold, and looking miserable. "It is quite a mistake. Desmond" —floundering hopelessly—"told me to come here; he of course"—erring still more cruelly—"couldn't know, you know."

"No," says Lady Clontarf. She seems to have grown a little taller and a good deal straighter during his remarkable speech.

"There's one comfort," says Donat, still standing like a culprit in the door-way: "I haven't disturbed you—I mean"—mildly—"you weren't asleep, or that."

"Oh, no," says Doris, relaxing a little. "I am not thinking of going to sleep. Isn't—isn't it cold over there? Do come to the fire." Gentle concern is making a hard fight with ice, as she makes these two last remarks.

"Thank you, no," says Clontarf, not budging an inch. "The fact is, I am rather tired after my ride, and Desmond persuaded me to get an hour's sleep before I should be wanted. I dare say I shall be able to get it somewhere. I hope"—preparing to depart—"you understand how extremely sorry I am to have disturbed you."

"Do not make yourself unhappy about this absurd mistake," says Doris, quickly, but still coldly. "Rest here for your hour, if you will."

"It is good of you; but I will not take advantage of your offer," he says, with his hand upon the door. "Why should I trouble you?"

For a moment she hesitates; then she flushes crimson and takes a step towards him.

"Do not go," she says, unconsciously clasping her hands. She turns very pale, and her eyes seek the ground. "Why need any one know that—that——" Here she breaks down altogether and stands before him motionless, with down-bent head.

He is so sorry for her that he pretends not to understand her.

"May I really stay?" he asks, gayly. "You cannot think what you have saved me from! If I may avail myself of your hospitality, I shall escape an hour's wandering through unknown corridors and sundry indignant ejectments from sacred chambers. You are sure I shall not be in your way?" Thus he delicately ignores both her confusion and her nervous breakdown.

Reassured by his manner, she looks up at him.

"Indeed no," she says, smiling and shaking her beautiful head. "How tired you look! Do lie down there at once, and I will promise to call you when your time is up."

"You speak as if it were the night before my execution," he says, laughing. "Well, my gentle jailer, I will trust to you to let me have ample time to prepare for it. Is this"—pointing to a distant lounge—"the one I may call my own?"

"When am I to rouse you?" asks she, anxiously.

"Desmond has given me two hours, but one will be suffi-

cient, so, 'If you're waking, call me early;' but I expect you will be asleep yourself by that time."

He flings himself wearily upon the sofa as he speaks, and then looks up at her.

"It is very good of you to make me welcome in this way," he says. "Somehow I feel that I am your guest to-night, not Desmond's."

"Shall I put this over you?" asks she, softly. She stoops as she speaks, and lays a heavy fur cloak over his shoulders.

"That's delicious," murmurs he, drowsily. "If you would just tuck it round me——"

She does as she is desired, with a lingering care.

"Ah! so!" he says, contentedly: "you have placed me in Paradise;" and presently he is sound asleep.

Doris, creeping back noiselessly to her former seat by the fire, sits there motionless, lest any smallest movement may wake him from his slumbers. She fears almost to breathe, and keeps her slender fingers clasped upon her knees in durance vile; she hardly even dares to blink her soft eyes, that are growing tired and sad from the firelight, because she is afraid that if she lets their lids descend upon them, sleep might descend too, and keep her from waking him at the appointed hour.

Then a heavy sound from the lounge behind her suggests the hope that he is too fast asleep to be drawn back to active life for some time yet to come, except by sundry shakes and calls.

A great desire to see him as he sleeps overcomes her. Rising tremulously, each rustle of her gown causing her a separate pang of fear, she slowly and with cautious footsteps approaches him, and looks down thoughtfully upon his closed lids and tranquil face.

Yes, he is indeed asleep, sunk in that heavy oblivion that comes after all bodily fatigue, be it honest or otherwise. One arm is flung above his head, the other is hanging a little over the edge of the couch. "Sleep, death's beautiful brother, that fairest phenomenon," has him in his keeping.

How helpless he looks! How simple a thing it would be now to either kill him, or caress him, without danger of discovery! His face, lying in its placid repose, shows ignorant of friend and foe alike, is undisturbed by dreams, kind or hateful; upon his cheeks his long, dark lashes lie without a quiver. There is a helplessness about his whole appearance and attitude that appeals to the heart of her who now stands looking silently down upon him.

He is her own,—nothing can alter that,—her very own, and she is now guarding him. The sense of motherhood

that belongs to all good women grows warm within her breast as she listens to the regular coming and going of his breath, and watches the grand but awful unconsciousness that renders him—the strong man—weaker now than she.

Of what is he thinking? Whither is the brain—that is forbidden for a moment to be idle—wandering now?

> "Sleep hath its own world;
> A boundary between the things misnamed
> Death and existence."

Has he reached it? Has she a place in it, however small?

She falls upon her knees beside him, and looks at him long and earnestly, and as she looks a veil is torn away from her that until now has lain between her heart and her. A sudden fire creeps into her veins; all at once it comes to her that she has found the very elixir of life,—its charm, its strength, its sweetness, and, alas! alas! its sorrow.

It is love indeed that makes "the world go round;" but, oh, how heavily it goes for some!

Her heart beats passionately, but more with fear than gladness, as the great truth becomes known to her. The fact that after so many months of married life she has discovered herself now for the first time to be in love with her own husband strikes her as being more tragical than comic. The vividness of the emotion fills her whole being to the overflowing even of her very soul, and renders her cold and mute.

To escape from his presence, to get away from him, somewhere, anywhere, is now her great desire. She has turned as though in search of some means of carrying out her design, when he stirs in his sleep.

Lazily, with a little transient smile upon his lips, he flings up one arm, and as it descends again his hand accidentally falls upon hers, and rests there as though well contented. This contact breaks the spell that has been troubling her: she leans towards him. A little rush of rapturous tenderness obliterates all other thoughts, and, almost before she is aware of what she is doing, she has pressed upon his cheek a kiss, full of innocent passion.

An instant later, with shamed and crimsoned cheeks, she springs to her feet, and, standing back from him, waits, in a very agony of fear and doubt, to see if he will waken, and, in waking, know her guilty of this *unsought* caress. Oh, the cruelty of this last thought!

But he never stirs. He sleeps on as blissfully as though neither fear, nor grief, nor love, nor any other emotion has

come nigh him. After all, what is she to him, that her kiss should waken him? Seating herself once more in her low chair, she bursts into silent tears.

* * * * * * * * *

"I am afraid I must rouse you now. It is quite one o'clock," she says, calmly. It is an hour later.

"Is it? Eh? Oh, by Jove, yes, of course it must be," he says, springing to his feet. "And no hangman, after all! and no ropes or anything! You haven't half kept your promise." He laughs in a rather sleepy fashion, and gives himself a little stretch and a little shake. "What a shame that you should have been kept awake all night!" he says. "I firmly believed you would have gone to sleep too, and now I suppose you are fagged to death and thoroughly worn out. Let me see."

He turns her towards the lamp, which is even more lowered than when first he came in, and regards her keenly.

"You are as white as a sheet," he says, anxiously; "and —one might almost think you had been—crying."

"One would think wrong, then," interrupts she, with a coldness that is very nearly repellent. "Now go. Mr. Desmond will call you a recreant knight if you are not up to time."

Something in her tone forbids his further lingering, so he leaves the room, and runs swiftly but noiselessly down to the morning-room, where he knows he will probably find Brian awaiting him.

As for Doris, for an hour after he leaves her she never stirs, but sits motionless before her fire, thinking of many things that have been, of many things that yet may be; whilst through all her imaginings runs a certainty of coming evil that makes each smallest sound in the darkened household a very thunderbolt of terror. Once or twice Monica and Kit have wandered in to her, but, as they have been put almost on their oaths by Brian not to leave their own rooms, they soon flit back again to those safe quarters, lest their absence from them should be discovered.

And now the silence, the loneliness, is growing almost too great to be borne. Up and down, up and down her room she paces, finding it impossible to sit still for any length of time. For the last half-hour, even the noises that had terrified her off and on have ceased, and nothing disturbs the unnatural stillness but the hoarse bark of some watch-dog, that sounds as though it were coming from some place a hundred miles away.

It is terrible being here, all alone, waiting, waiting—for what? What are they doing down-stairs? what can they be doing to necessitate this awful stillness? Oh, if any-

thing should have happened to some one below, and the others should be keeping it quiet, fearing to alarm those above, until it is absolutely necessary!

This last thought renders suspense no longer bearable: catching up a black lace scarf, and twisting it round her head and throat to protect her from the chilly night air, noiselessly and candleless she leaves her room, and commences her creeping journey down the broad oak staircase. Just where the moonbeams can enter the Gothic window a pale flood of light is thrown, but here, and beyond it, all is lost in blackest gloom. A silence as of death seems to have wrapped the house in its embrace: so unearthly is this silence that the faint frou-frou of her soft dressing-gown, as it trails behind her, seems in the supernatural calm a loud and distressing sound. Gathering up the train in her hand, she descends cautiously until the hall beneath is reached.

She has never once asked herself whither she is going. Yet she knows. Instinctively she turns towards that room where they had told her inadvertently was the bow-window so well formed for purposes of exit or entrance. It is the one window in the house through which a sure escape might be made, even on the most brilliant of moonlight nights, a projecting buttress causing it to lie in perpetual shadow. Once round this buttress (which cannot be overlooked by any window), one could pause to take breath for a moment before a final start, and then there would be only a swift rush along the ivied western wall, and a dart into the cool impenetrable shadows of the myrtles beyond, and then a low wall to jump, and after that the wide country and freedom.

She hardly knows how she has thought it all out,—or if she ever thought of it till now,—but it certainly seems an old story to her as she gropes her way, like a slim pale ghost, through the hall,—a story with a tall evil-faced phantom for its hero. The phantom puzzles her. He will not fall into an earthly shape, but slips from her spirit-like almost as she catches him. And yet she knows he is in the story, and she knows too that in the room with the bow-window, through which the spirit is vainly trying to escape, she will find her husband.

The bow-window is in the library, and the library may be reached by two doors. One is but little used; yet still, guided by her instinct, she decides—in a dreamy, unexpressed fashion—upon entering it by the least frequented way. No thought that this unused door may probably creak in the opening disturbs her, yet when she comes to it she is surprised to find it already open, and so far wide that she can enter without touching either door or side-post.

Lightly, stealthily, she moves forward, but when she comes to the threshold she pauses, and, shrinking back a little, lays her hand upon the wood-work of the door and tries vainly to pierce the obscurity beyond.

It is not all obscurity. A chink in one of the shutters lets in a stream of moonlight that shoots like a tiny pathway of pale-yellow radiance straight across the room from wall to wall. But into this pathway comes no living form. He—if indeed any one is present—must be standing motionless, hidden within the dense gloom that enshrouds the rest of the apartment.

Oh for a sigh, a breath, the vaguest movement! The silence is so intense, so deadly, that she quails before it. What if there should be nobody here but she herself? There is a ghastliness in the thought that she is, may be, watching here alone, with only imaginary forms within the silent room beyond, and far from all the occupied parts of the house, that frightens her. Involuntarily she tightens her grasp upon the wood-work of the door, as though to assure herself that it, at least, is real and not part of a hideous dream; and then she proposes to herself a swift, if ignominious, retreat to the subdued but wholesome light she has left behind her.

But how to get up that dreadful staircase again, where the cold outstretched hands of statues greet one with a chilly touch as one goes by? Nevertheless, she will brave it; she——

Hark! What is that? A step, surely! Stealthy,—slow,—but unmistakable!

Warily—with a faint sound that would be inaudible to any but a cruelly strained attention—it seems to draw nearer,—nearer still!

Is it friend or foe? What friend would come thus stealing in the dead of night? Is there fresh treachery afoot?

At this supreme instant Lady Clontarf forgets her terrors of a moment since, and, with strung nerves and head erect, listens with all her might. What though she be in truth alone in this dark room, with no help near, and a desperate foe within a few feet of her? still she will wait, and discover, if possible, his plans, and do her utmost to confound them.

Ever nearer comes the creeping footstep to that silvery path of moonlight lying athwart the room. Then a tall dark figure enters it, crosses it, and is gone again, but not before her eager eyes have seen and marked it. The footman's face, pallid and full of wild and evil determination, flashed upon her in that one fateful instant.

And not upon her alone! Clontarf and Dicky Browne, standing concealed in a dark corner, see him too; in fact,

the wretched man's coat actually brushes against them as he gropes his way hurriedly but noiselessly towards the window already mentioned as giving easy access to the ground outside.

Already his hand is on the bar that secures the window. He has drawn it back; the evidence of his guilt is complete, when an irrepressible exclamation from Dicky Browne tells him he is discovered.

Quick as lightning he springs backward, and, turning, makes, with the eager instinct of the hunted animal, for the unused door, where Doris is still standing, quivering but undaunted. She too had sprung forward just as Dicky's voice fell upon her ear,—oh, how welcome was that voice! —and then had stopped short, thankful to find she need be only a simple spectator of whatever events may follow.

As he rushes wildly in her direction the man stumbles over a chair and comes heavily to the ground, but is up again in an instant.

"Stand! or I shall fire," says Clontarf's voice, stern and clear. As he speaks, Dicky flings open the now unbarred shutter, and a flood of moonlight, rushing in, illumines the scene.

Hearing the voice, Connor turns as if at bay, and thrusts his hand into his bosom. There is a ferocious gleam in his eyes. He glances hurriedly from Clontarf to Dicky, and then back again. After that he never once removes his eyes from Clontarf.

In him he sees the man who, only a few hours ago, had pointed him out to Brian as an object of suspicion, who had made him a mark for the eyes of all the crowd of idle gazers in the hall. He sees, too, the determination in Clontarf's face, and knows by it how small is his chance of effecting an escape in any way. Involuntarily his fingers tighten upon the murderous weapon in his breast, and, as their eyes meet, he glances defiantly back at Donat.

Doris, watching him with distended gaze from her secret place in the door-way,—to which the moonbeams cannot penetrate, and where her presence is unsuspected by the three men,—tells herself with a sinking heart that he is bent on having her husband's blood. His face is eager as a maniac's, and without hope.

How long a time it takes to tell all this!—how short is the doing of it! Barely one minute in reality elapses between that warning call from Clontarf and the moment when the traitor, drawing his hand from his breast, levels the revolver he had there concealed at Clontarf.

"Ay, fire away, and be d—— to ye!" shouts he, with a yell of defiance, discharging the revolver straight at his opponent.

But not before something miraculous—as it seems to Dicky and Clontarf—has happened. Not before a slight figure clad in white has rushed forward and flung herself upon the would-be assassin's arm. There is a slight struggle, and, when the bullet does find its home, it is not in Clontarf's breast, but in the wall some inches to his right, passing so close by Doris that her husband and Dicky for a moment turn sick and cold; but she, though pale and trembling, now that it is all at an end, is still erect and self-possessed.

It takes but a little time after this to bear the desperate man to the ground and overpower him. Securely made prisoner, he is still raving and cursing when The Desmond and some of the others, having heard the report of the fire-arm, hurry to the spot.

There is very little talk after this, but a good deal of action, as it takes a considerable amount of trouble, and several men, to carry the kicking, furious victim of a few vile demagogues to a room up-stairs, where he is locked in, and left to his own devices until morning shall dawn.

Lady Clontarf, having answered a few terrified and admiring questions from Monica and Kit (who had broken all oaths and left their apartments at the sound of the shot fired), had escaped to her room, and the others, having again secured the library, disperse themselves to such "watch-towers" as have been assigned them for the night.

"Out with all lights again, except those in the back-rooms," says The Desmond,—a few candles having been produced during the late disturbance.

"I'll put mine out in one moment," says Clontarf, rushing past him. "I only want——"

He is out of hearing before The Desmond can catch the remainder of his speech, and is hurrying along the corridor up-stairs to Brian's dressing-room to fetch some cartridges. The corridor is in darkness, but for the candle he himself is holding, which gives little or no light, so fast he is going. Consequently, not being able to see her, he runs presently very nearly into the arms of Doris.

"Oh! it is you?" he says, holding the candle aloft and peering down into her face. "You seem to be everywhere, like a guardian angel. You slipped away from us so suddenly after that fellow was secured that I had not time to thank you for what you did for me. Let me thank you now"—very seriously—"for having saved my life."

As he says this, he places the candle on a table a little away from them, so that the gloom that all along has surrounded her is now intensified.

"You must not make too much of it," she says, in a low tone.

"How can I make enough of it? Do you know that that brute might have killed you? He"—with a shudder—"was very near it, too."

"I did not think of that, fortunately, at the moment, or perhaps"—with a rather languid smile—"I should have left you to your fate and beat an ignominious retreat."

"There is another thing," he says, hurriedly, a shade crossing his face. "We, Dicky and I, heard you coming, and we made sure you were Connor. When you paused in the door-way, I concluded you were afraid to come on, and —and—I had raised my revolver to fire at you, when the real step arrested me. Good heavens!" exclaims he, turning deadly white, "what induced you to come down at such a time, and without giving us warning? When I think of what might have happened, I——"

"Well, nothing has happened," says Doris, but her voice sounds more and more languid.

"It was a very near thing, though, in both cases; and as for that villain,—why, his bullet must have all but grazed you."

"All but"—It is with difficulty she repeats these words after him. How strange the candle looks, over there, so far—far—*is* it far away? and how many candles are there? who was it came up the corridor a moment since with one? and where is he now? who was it?

"You are ill, faint," says Clontarf, in a terrified tone, catching her as she sways heavily forward. As he does so, he necessarily presses against her left arm, and a cry, low but suggestive of extreme pain, breaks from her lips: consciousness returning to her with the sharp pang his touch has caused her, she instinctively tries to push him from her.

"Not that. Do not touch this arm," she says, faintly.

Overcome by a horrible fear, he throws back the heavy black lace scarf that is covering her arm in part, and——

What is this that is soiling the purity of her white gown? The sleeve of her dress has been rudely torn away, and on the hanging fragments of cashmere, and trickling down the fair soft flesh, is—blood.

"You are hurt!—wounded!" cries he, in a dreadful voice. "He has killed you, and for me,—me! Doris, speak to me!"

"It is nothing,—nothing!" gasps she, faintly; and then she sways again, and, with a vague confiding gesture full of pathos, puts out her hands to him and falls insensible upon his breast.

Frantic with terror, he raises the slender figure in his arms and rushes with her to Mrs. Desmond's room.

Fortunately, Monica is not devoid of wit and nerve; for-

tunately, too, Kit (who has just returned from a clandestine meeting with Brabazon on the stairs) is a person equal to any emergency, or Donat's distraught visage would have frightened them into fits, or at least utter incompetency.

As it is, in less time than I can write it (though I drove my quill with railroad speed), they restore Doris to consciousness, and convince Donat that the wound, though "nasty," is not dangerous.

Evidently Connor's bullet had struck her, and torn away a little of the skin, but not enough to make a scar or spoil the beauty of that perfect arm forever. "Time will surely heal it, and that soon." "He need not be uneasy, indeed," etc., etc. And when presently Doris herself is so far recovered as to be able to sit up and submit to the bathing of it, and has expressed a wish that he will go back to his post and make a point of forgetting all about her, he is gently pushed from the room by Kit, and told not to come back again upon any pretext whatsoever, unless with news of the extinction of the foe.

CHAPTER XXIII.

"Lo! who may trust on Fortune any throw?
For him that followeth all this world of pres,
Ere he be ware, is often laid full low."

"By such a way as he would least suppose."

"TIME is up," says Brian, striking a match to look at his watch.

"More than up," says Mr. Browne, gloomily. "I shouldn't wonder if they sold us in the long run. There is no depending on such rascals." He is evidently struggling with a heavy sense of injury.

"Yes, quite half-past two," says Brian, shutting up his watch with an angry snap. "Can they be waiting for some private signal from that fellow Connor?"

"I always told you I believed it to be a cock-and-bull story from start to finish," says The Desmond, irritably, who had never told them anything of the sort.

"Hush! what's that?" says Brabazon, pointing to a bushy laurustinus that stands by itself rather outside the shrubberies at the western side of the gravel sweep.

The four men mentioned have stationed themselves in an upper room overlooking the avenue, the shrubberies, and all the principal approaches to the front of the house: Clontarf and Gerald Burke in the north wing are watching the

entrances to and from the yard, and most of the back premises; from a third window, too, in the room they have chosen for observation, they can get a practical view of the front lawn and shrubberies.

The women, as I have said, have been commanded not to leave their rooms on pain of death, and, with Bridget, —who had been publicly declared by Monica before the other servants to be indispensable to their comfort,—are sitting in shivering expectation before Monica's fire, having distinctly declined to bear the suspense alone. Doris, in spite of many entreaties, cannot be persuaded even to lie down, but, with her poor arm carefully bandaged, is lounging in a huge chair, drinking tea. Indeed, they are all drinking tea. They have drawn the curtains very closely, and have allowed themselves a night-light, that only serves to make them a degree more dismal, being highly suggestive of death-rattles and corpses.

It is a brilliant night; the moon above in the heavens is flinging its broad beams upon the sleeping earth, the slight but unbroken coating of snow that covers all the land rendering its "pale fire" even more "effectual." On barren branch and leafy bough lies that "winter robe of purest white," and on the gravel too so warmly does it rest that one can hardly tell where the gravel ceases and the grass beyond begins. Everything on which one's eyes may rest is a-glitter with nature's chilly diamonds, and the moonlight lying over all softens and deepens into tenderest beauty each dark-green leaf, each snow-crowned glistening tower and turret.

But there are corners into which even the prying Diana cannot penetrate. A certain portion of the gravel, almost on a line with the laurustinus already mentioned, is lost in shadow thrown by a high wall, troy-shaped at its summit, that comes out from the southern side of the house and is supposed to be the most ancient part of it,—a part that had once been a monastery, or a chapel, or something.

"I don't see anything," says Brian, following the direction of Brabazon's intent gaze.

"Wait!—" Even as he speaks, a long dark shadow falls across the moonlit snow on the gravel, then moves towards the darkened space near the wall, and is lost.

They are all now spell-bound, and silent with expectation. Presently a second shadow seems to approach them, and then a man's figure steps stealthily from behind the laurustinus and follows the first into the protective dusk of the old ivied wall. He is followed by another and yet another, until a large number of men are assembled, who, all keeping carefully out of the betraying moonlight, seem to whisper among themselves, and hesitate, and glance im-

patiently at the house now and again, as if perplexed by the non-appearance of something or some one. Every one of these men is holding in one hand a huge log of blackened wood.

"O Connor, 'where art thou?' 'Why tarry the wheels of thy chariot?'" exclaims Mr. Browne, with sympathetic appreciation of their perplexity, betraying at the same time a dangerous desire to execute a war-dance.

"I'll speak to them," says Brian, suddenly going forward and throwing up the window.

"What do you want here, you fellows?" he asks, in a loud authoritative voice.

His sudden appearance, being totally unexpected, causes a dead silence to fall upon the body of men. They do not answer immediately, but commence a parley among themselves of a very animated description, judging by the impassioned movements of their hands and arms. Their gesticulations can be indistinctly seen through the gloom that encircles them. Then one of their number, stepping forward, but still keeping carefully out of the moonlight, glances up defiantly at the window.

"You!" he answers, in a tone of open insolence.

"Well, you see me. What can I do for you?" asks Brian, calmly.

"Nothing! 'tis we're goin' to do for you to-night," replies the same voice, jeeringly,—which coarse sally produces a loud laugh of commendation from his fellows.

"As for that, we shall see," says Brian, still quite calmly

"Stand a little more to this side, Desmond: you will be more out of their range," says Brabazon, quickly, drawing him as he speaks into the desired position.

"Let me speak to them," says The Desmond, who is by this time very nearly beyond control.

"Certainly not," replies his nephew, sternly. Here a fresh voice from the crowd below attracts their attention.

"Stand back, you," says this man, plainly indicating Brian, "an' show us the ould man. Where's The Desmond hisself? Where's the oppressor? What's he hidin' behind ye for? Tell him to step out an' let us see him, if he isn't afraid of us!"

"Afraid!" roars The Desmond, now hopelessly broken loose, making a dash past Brian, and fearlessly thrusting his body half out of the window. "Who dared to say that?"

For the moment they are overcome by this vision of their master, standing thus openly defying them, with the moonlight shining full upon his white head and his indignant face. "Who among you dares to accuse me of cowardice? What man among you has the hardihood to mention the

word? You! who would have come to-night to my bedside to murder an old man, when he lay sleeping and defenceless! Cowards all, I defy you! I——"

"Take yerself an' yer talk to h——!" cries a violent voice from below; and Brian, who has been keenly watching the smallest movement in the excited mob, has barely time to drag The Desmond back into the room, when a loud report is heard, and a bullet whistles past the spot where his head was only a second since.

But to get The Desmond out of danger when his blood is up is one thing; to keep him out of it is quite another: the bullet is an insult that rouses him to even fiercer wrath, if that be possible, and wakes in him no fears at all.

"Let me go, Brian, I tell you," he says, and again rushes to the window.

"Ha! a bad shot, my lads!" he cries. "I tell you my day is not yet come: I regret I cannot say the same for yours. Your friend and fellow-patriot Connor has found me a little too much for him, and is now in safe custody. The rest of you, I have no doubt, will find yourselves in company with him again before long."

A groan of angry derision from the crowd follows this announcement, to be succeeded by a good deal of low but vehement argument. Their fears concerning Connor have now been confirmed, and the news of his capture has no doubt raised apprehensive doubts within their breasts. Will he be true, secret, silent? "Approvers," of late, have been unpleasantly ready to come forward and save their own skins at the expense of their comrades.

As though he can read their thoughts, The Desmond goes on derisively:

"I dare say he will be able to buy his own release by the identification of a few of you. Informers have not been unknown in your ranks during these past few months; but"—with a contemptuous laugh—"don't let that weigh with you; there is always the glory, you know,—the glory to be derived from the attempted murder of one old man by twenty stalwart fellows like you!"

Here, a dangerous murmur rising in the crowd, he is again hauled back into the room by Brabazon and his nephew. I am here compelled to confess that Mr. Browne has shown a shameless disinclination to assist in his suppression from the first, and has publicly applauded and encouraged him all along, and has, during the last two minutes, been prevented by sheer force from joining him at the window and adding his invectives and jeers to those already offered.

"Let me go, you boys; I haven't half done with them yet," says The Desmond, who, on the whole, I think, is

enjoying himself. "Let me say one word more: there's a thing about Parnell, that——"

"That they shan't hear," says Brian, with determination. "I shouldn't care if you were my uncle ten times over, I tell you plainly if you go near that window again I shall take you and lock you up with Connor."

At this awful threat they all laugh a little, except Dicky, who is heard to mutter something that sounds like "a beastly shame."

"And you with him, for company," says Brian, turning wrathfully upon Mr. Browne, after which there is no knowing but a civil war might have ensued in-doors worse in its consequences than the public one without, but for a hurried exclamation from Brabazon.

"What are they up to now?" he says, curiously.

Following on his words comes a hoarse roar from the crowd beneath, that brings them all to the window. The people are talking and gesticulating violently, and at the last a tall man on the edge of the group, striking a match, sets fire to the log of wood in his hand. Judging by the rapidity with which this wood takes fire and bursts into a brilliant flame, it must have been soaked in paraffin or smeared with tar some little time before. A moment later a dozen of those rough torches are ablaze. The men, inflamed with anger and eager for revenge, are no longer mindful of the necessity for caution, and let the flames light up their faces and disperse the gloom that until now has hidden them. High above their heads they swing their blazing logs, and the flames, darting now here, now there, as the light wind drives them, play fantastic tricks with their wild faces, and lend a weird enchantment to the whole scene.

It is an imposing spectacle, but melancholy in the extreme, when one reflects upon its cause, and the cruelty of those who by their specious words and arguments, and promises impossible of fulfilment, have led astray the unthinking multitudes, and urged them to deeds that have the gallows only for their goal, whilst their own pockets have been richly lined by the hardly-earned pence of their victims. Here, with the few, the safety and the gain; there, with the many, the risk, disgrace, and death.

Now all the torches are ablaze, their red gleams making pale the tranquil light of the sad "wandering moon" as she floats above this turmoil in the calm ether of her home. The flames rush wildly over snow and ivied wall, and light up with a flash the sacred shadows of the shrubs beyond, and, darting even farther, drag into notoriety the ghastly gauntness of the skeleton trees as they wave their

leafless arms to and fro, to and fro, forever, as though in sad remembrance of a happy past.

Suddenly a man dashing out recklessly from among the others, and looking back as though to encourage them to follow him, flings his blazing wood against the hall door.

"What is it you hope to do?" says Brian, addressing them before another man has stirred.

"'Tis cowld, yer honor: we want to warm ourselves. Ye wouldn't grudge us a fire on Christmas night, would ye?" answers some one, with a mocking pretence at servility. As he speaks, a second torch is flung against the door, followed almost directly, by two or three more.

"I understand your meaning," says Brian, in an unmoved tone, "and am prepared to resent it. However, one word: I think it only fair to warn you that the next man who steps forward to lay a lighted torch against my uncle's door will get a bullet in his brain."

"There are more bullets than yours!" yells a voice from beneath, accompanied by a little bit of lead that, missing Brian by the eighth of an inch, sinks deep into the woodwork of the window behind him.

"A near shave!" says Desmond, with a low laugh. It is a dangerous laugh, however, devoid of mirth and full of revengeful possibilities, but without a suspicion of fear.

"What scoundrels!" he says between his set teeth. "Now, Dicky, I'll give you a job: fire with me and George and Neil over their heads."

"Over their heads," says Dicky, with intense disgust. "What's the good of firing over their heads? Did you ever hear such rubbish? Fire into 'em, if you're going to do it at all."

"No, they shall have one chance more," says Brian, quietly. "I haven't told them I'd shoot the first man who tried to shoot me, but the next man who tried to fire the house. Let us keep to our compact. Now, then, and take care you fire high."

"You're a good fellow, Brian," says The Desmond, regarding his nephew with keen admiration.

They do fire very harmlessly, but for a while the noise, the fire and smoke, and the nearness of the danger subdues the murderous band below. Then a yell of hatred and execration and defiance bursts from them anew, and, though as yet no one makes the forbidden movement towards the house, blazing torches are hurled at it with deadly aim.

"Something will have to be done soon," says Brabazon, stamping his foot with rage.

"Wait,—wait," says Brian, in a curious tone. "What is that fellow saying?"

"'Tis slow work, masther, surely," calls out a jibing voice. "We ax yer pardon for the delay. Wood is a poor thing, but, if we don't succeed in givin' ye a house-warmin' to-night, we'll promise to bring the raal stuff wid us next time."

This elicits a laugh and a derisive cheer from his companions.

"Ay, dynamite's the thing that'll show ye up to the county," says another voice.

"Ay, an' blow ye up too, be me troth," says a third, in a savage tone.

"Now! now! will you do nothing?" exclaims Dicky, almost beside himself with passion. But the old squire stands watching Brian's face with a grim smile.

"Yes,—*now!*" says Brian, quietly. As he speaks, a tall stalwart young fellow, with the frame of a Hercules, steps out from among the others and with an air of insolent challenge advances towards the house. Brian, raising his revolver, takes deliberate aim at him and fires!

A shriek of agony breaks upon the air. Throwing one arm upwards, the young man staggers back and falls upon the snow an inert and senseless mass.

Simultaneously with his fall there comes a sound as of the tramp of many horses galloping. Nearer and nearer it comes, seeming to the terrified ears of the insurgents to be almost bearing down upon them.

"The troops from Skibbereen!" cries an elderly man, in a voice full of agitation. "The lad is done for, I believe," glancing at the motionless body. "Run for yer lives while ye may, the rest of ye! Lave him alone, Mick," calling to a man who is bending over the prostrate form. "He's finished, I tell ye."

"Thrue for ye, I'm thinkin'," says the man Mick, with a groan of dismay, seeing that the wounded figure, as he lays it gently down again, gives not the faintest sign of life. "'Tis a bad night's work! Who's to tell his mother —an'—the girl?"

He has no time, however, for further regrets, and no one to whom to utter them. Seeing his companions have all disappeared, he too girds up his loins and flees with the rest of them.

Soon all that is left of the late turbulent scene is a few smouldering pieces of half-burned timber, some trampled snow, and that awful silent thing lying out there beneath the quiet stars. No quiver runs through its frame, no sigh escapes it. From beneath it a thin dark stream is creeping slowly, slowly, defiling the purity of the carpet winter has spread beneath him.

"Cowardly hounds!" says The Desmond, with a short

laugh. "Frightened by a shadow! Those colts broke loose from the paddock in good time. Brian," sinking his voice and pointing to the figure outside, "what is to be done with—with—*that?*"

"I hope I have not killed him," says Brian, in a low tone quick with passionate remorse. "Who will come down with me to bring him in?"

"Let us make haste: it is very cold for him out there,—poor beggar!" says Dicky Browne, eagerly.

"If he can feel it," mutters The Desmond. "Brian."

But Brian is half-way down the staircase by this time, with Dicky and Brabazon at his heels.

Unfastening the heavy doors, that are somewhat scorched by the blazing logs, but have gallantly withstood their attempts to burn them, they go out into the snow, and, stooping over the wounded man, lift him in their arms and bear him into the hall as tenderly as though he were their dearest friend, instead of a mortal foe.

"Bring more lights, some one," says Brian, and presently the some one, in the shape of Clontarf, who with Gerald Burke has rejoined them, has lit all the hall lamps again, and shed a flood of warm light upon the darkness of a moment since.

Upon a couch in the centre of the hall they lay their senseless burden; and Gerald, who is somewhat of a doctor, proceeds to examine him.

That he is in no danger of dying, but that his arm is shattered just above the elbow, is soon made known to them, to the intense relief of Brian, and (though he would have died rather than confess it) The Desmond also.

"He was born for the gallows," he says, grimly. "It wouldn't do for us to cheat him of his coming fame."

Nevertheless it is he who (with a touch tender as a woman's) helps Burke to divest the culprit of his coat and restore him to consciousness. However, when this last feat has been accomplished it is of little good to anybody, as their prisoner barely takes time to look round him and recognize the awful hands into which he has fallen, before he goes off again into a deadlier faint than before, brought on probably as much by fear as pain.

The broad oak staircase is still in shadow, the illuminations below, which are on quite a magnificent scale, being strictly confined to the hall itself. A slight figure, therefore, emerging from the semi-darkness of the stairs is scarcely seen by those beneath. This figure, descending rapidly, precipitates itself upon Brian's neck, without loss of time or the slightest apology. On the whole, he bears the shock with admirable fortitude.

"So it is all over," says Monica, with a sigh that is almost

a sob. "I—we—have been half mad with fright, but we kept our words and our room for all that! I stole down now to see for myself if all was right, and left Kit with Doris.—Yes, Lord Clontarf, she is really wonderfully well, and has consented at last to go to bed, as this terrible affair is at an end.—Oh! poor man!" seeing the wounded enemy for the first time, and growing very pale. "Is he—is he—very much hurt?"

"No," says Gerald Burke. "A smashed arm and a bad conscience,—nothing more!"

"How was he wounded? What did he do?" asks Monica, with a shudder.

"He was trying to set fire to the house, so Brian very considerately argued the point with him," says Mr. Browne.

"Oh, *Brian!*" says Monica, in tones of the deepest reproach.

"Oh, *nonsense!*" says Browne, with much exasperation. "Look here, now: do you mean to tell me, Mrs. Desmond, that you think every one of these rascals ought to be let go scot-free?"

"But to try to kill a man!"

"But to try to burn many men,—and women too,—and the baby, for aught they knew! The *baby!*" triumphantly. "Just fancy!—the baby! It was well you sent him to Coole."

"I don't believe it. No one would burn a baby," says Monica, indignantly.

"Oh, wouldn't they? Why, there was a woman in England the other day who——"

"We are not in England now," with lofty disdain.

"No: perhaps it might be as well if we were," says Mr. Browne, with feeling.

"He must be kept here, of course," The Desmond is saying, in a reflective tone: "we can have the sergeant first thing in the morning and deliver him up to his tender mercies, when the doctor has made him all right: in the mean time he must be my guest."

"A delectable one, truly," exclaims Brabazon, laughing. "Yet he doesn't look half a bad fellow, does he? What a handsome profile!"

"I'll see to him to-night: he shall be my charge," says Brian. "One of you fellows may as well keep me company, as I dare say he will require a good deal of care with that wretched arm of his." That Brian is still remorseful is plain to every one.

"How white he looks!" says Monica, creeping nearer to the couch, and for the first time looking nervously down at the still figure lying on it. "How——"

Suddenly her voice dies away. With a touch of horror

on her face, she steps backward and lays her hand upon Brabazon's arm, who happens to be nearest to her.

"Oh! not this man!" she says, faintly. "Not this."

"I wonder what he'll get?" says Gerald Burke, who has his back turned to the others, and can see nothing but his patient. "It ought to be penal servitude for life."

"It ought to be hanging," says The Desmond, with comfortable vehemence, knowing in his soul that it won't be.

As the words pass his lips, a shadow, that has stood trembling among the other shadows within the darkness that enshrouds the staircase for the past two minutes, now darts forward and confronts him.

It is Bridget. A tall and pretty girl always, she now looks almost majestic as she faces The Desmond, with panting breath and flashing eyes.

"Ay! say ye so! an' to me!" she cries, striking her hand upon her breast. "Lift yer head, Desmond, an' say it to me again if ye dare! To me! who brought him to this pass through love of her," pointing to Monica, who makes a step towards her. But the girl waves her back. "To save the man she loves, I bethrayed the man *I* love, thrustin' in her word, an' her power, to save him; an' now—now!—" Her voice fails her as she glances at the couch, but by a passionate effort she recovers it. "What word is that that passed yer lips?" she cries, advancing to The Desmond. "Why, 'tis I—I—that have laid him there,"—flinging out her arms with a frantic gesture towards her unconscious lover,—"an' what is my reward to be? The gallows for him, it seems, an' a broken heart for meself: is that it? I tell ye what, Desmond,"—steadily fixing her master with eyes half mad with despair and fear: "before that happens I'll have yer heart's blood wid these two hands, weak as I look."

There is an untamed savagery about her, as she says this, that impresses the silent group around. No one breaks the stillness that follows on her words.

"Speak!" cries she, passionately, addressing The Desmond solely. Indeed, from the beginning she has seemed to be unaware of any other presence but his. "Say he shall go free! Or will ye have me curse ye where ye stand?"

"Bridget! Bridget!" says Monica.

At the sound of her voice, the girl turns, and, falling at her feet, clutches her gown, and in a very agony of agitation raises it to her lips.

"Yer oath!" she says, in a tone that rings through the hall. "Ye'll mind yer oath! Ye can't go back o' that! Think o' yer oath now, this minnit, an' of all I've done for you an' yours this night. See!"—indicating Brian by

a swift wild gesture, yet never removing her eyes from her mistress's face,—"your man is alive an' hearty this moment—an'—*look at mine*,—at mine! Spake to thim, I tell ye! Why are ye dumb?"

"Brian," says Monica, suddenly, in a quick clear voice, throwing her arms round the kneeling girl, "to-night's victory belongs to me! No one else has any claim to it. But for me, and the information I imparted to you, it might never have been. That man"—pointing to the wounded Con—"is my prisoner. Give him to me."

"To you!"

"Yes; to me. When I was given a hint of this conspiracy against our lives, I swore that if the whole of it was revealed to me, that man over there should be held blameless, however great his crime. The time has now come to redeem my promise. Give him to me."

"You would defeat justice!"

"I don't care about justice," says Mrs. Desmond, boldly: "I only want to save him from it. And what"—with sudden vehemence—"*is* justice? Is it not a just thing that I should hold to my bargain made with this poor faithful girl?"

"What is the meaning of all this?" says The Desmond, in a bewildered fashion, glancing with a frown at the kneeling Bridget, who, still crouching at Monica's feet and holding her gown, is looking with wild entreaty from one face to another.

"Let us hear the whole case," says Dicky Browne, judicially, whereupon Monica lays it bare before them.

"You don't mean to say you want to let him go free, without so much as a censure on his conduct?" says The Desmond, when her tale is told.

"Yes; that is what I do mean," says Monica, eagerly, "for her sake," laying her hand on Bridget's shoulder. "Think of all she has done for us! And—I have given my word! Under a promise of safety for him—*whatever* happened—I induced this girl to betray her lover; and shall I now, when my purpose is achieved, be false to her? I tell you no! it shall not be!" Her face pales with emotion, and, raising Bridget's hands, she lays them on her breast. The lamps shining down upon her show that her eyes are bright with tears.

The whole scene is like a picture,—the gleaming lamps, the prostrate figure of the wounded man, not wholly devoid of crimson staining, the girl upon her knees clinging desperately to Monica as her sole hope, the rapt eager faces of the two women, and the stern circle of men around them. For a moment no one stirs, no one speaks; then Brabazon, coming forward, lays his hand upon The Desmond's arm.

"I think, as Mrs. Desmond has pledged her honor in this matter, we should see that it is kept unsullied," he says, gently.

"I think so too," says Dicky Browne, who has been dying to say it for the past five minutes. "Let the poor beggar go: he has had his lesson, and a most unpleasant one into the bargain; and of course he wasn't the ringleader, you know."

"No: their leaders take very good care to keep themselves well out of the mess," says Brian, bitterly. "Halters and prison-fare don't suit them as well as living lavishly on swindled moneys, meant for the sustenance of the wretches whose poverty they so eloquently deplore."

"Oh, they do go to prison sometimes," says Dicky, apologetically.

"Pah!" says Brian. "Well, George,"—turning to his uncle,—"what is to be done? it rests with you."

"Brabazon is right," says The Desmond. "An oath is an oath, and should be kept at all hazards."

"Take your prisoner, then, Monica," says Brian, gravely, "and do with him as you will."

"She can't take him yet," says Mr. Burke, in a low voice. "He is hard to bring to, this last time. Give me the brandy again, Dicky; and mind his arm."

"I suppose it would be unsafe to send for Murphy?"

Murphy is the Dispensary doctor.

"Until the morning, yes. If we want really to keep him out of this affair, it is indispensable that the servants should not know of his capture. His own people and his accomplices will keep silent enough, for their own sakes."

"What if he shouldn't recover?" says Brabazon, in a low tone. It is not so low, however, that the strained ears of the miserable Bridget fail to hear it.

"He will," she says, with a fierce glance at him. "He shall! What is to become of me if anything happens to him? Are ye goln' to make *me* his murdherer?" Then she pushes them all aside, and, sinking down beside the couch, gazes long and eagerly at the pale face beneath her own.

"Con,—Con," she murmurs, in tones of the most extreme tenderness, "spake to me, spake to me, agra, an' say ye forgive me. I done it for the best indeed. An' I have her word, an' all their words, to save ye, an' I've kept the black stain from yer sowl. Spake to me, darlin', if only one word to say ye don't blame me entirely!"

Deadly silence.

"D'ye hear me, dear?" says the wretched girl. "'Tis I,—Bridget: wake up, I tell ye, an' rouse yerself: sure 'tis only a scratch ye have. Ye needn't be afeared any more, for not a hand will they put to ye. Take heart, asthore."

Then her voice changes. "Con,—*Con*," she calls, in a louder key, her lips growing white, "why don't ye answer? Mother—Mother o' heaven, look on him. He's growing cowld,—cowld!" She has lifted his heavy hand to her lips, and the chill that is on it startles her into violent fear.

"Ye've kilt him," cries she, in a terrible voice, springing to her feet. "An' all through me! It's cowld an' stiff he is this night, an' by the hand o' one o' ye! Oh that my tongue had been cut out before I spoke the word that brought him low! And *ye*—all o' ye,—was there no other one but *this* on whom ye could wreak yer vengeance? May"—here she flings her arms up towards heaven—"may the curse of——"

"Be quiet, girl," says Burke, sternly, seizing her arms and shaking her slightly. "He is not dead. See,—your violence has made him open his eyes: take care it doesn't make him close them again forever."

But the sight of his sweetheart so near to him, bringing with it a sense of protection, helps the stricken sinner to keep the consciousness he has at last regained, and, holding her hand, he looks sullenly but feebly round upon his master and the guests.

"Now, where is he to be carried?" asks Burke. "Better move him at once."

"There is that unoccupied chamber in the old tower," says Monica, "where nobody ever goes, and which can be entered by the back staircase from my rooms. Let him be taken there. The servants never enter it, and—and—Bridget can see to him,"—this very gently.

The girl rewards her with a grateful glance.

"Dr. Murphy will, I know, keep the whole thing perfectly secret, if I make a point of his doing so," goes on Monica; "and when he is able to get about again, he can go home, and keep his own counsel there."

So it is arranged.

CHAPTER XXIV.

> "And when the knight saw verily all this,
> That she so fair was, and so young thereto,
> For joy he hent her in his armës two."

It is an hour later. Night is speeding over the border; dawn—a cold and wintry dawn—is at hand. But as yet no crimson blush is in the east:

> "Sullen, methinks, and slow the morning breaks,
> As if the sun were listless to appear,
> And dark designs hung heavy on the day."

Clontarf, happening to cross the hall from the library to the smoking-room (none of the men have yet gone to bed), stops to turn down a lamp that is improvidently flaring. As he does so, his eyes chance to fall upon the staircase. Whether its artistic merits (it is of old and exquisite workmanship) have attracted his attention, or whether he is wrapped in admiration of the very improper little gods and goddesses that adorn its walls and smirk unceasingly and cast reckless love-glances at him from out of quaint recesses, who shall say?—but, after a prolonged gaze in their direction, he suddenly walks towards them and hastily mounts the staircase.

The corridor above is dark as when last he reached it, but a certain door a little farther on is ajar, and a light burning within it casts a ray of color towards him that leads to its starting-point. Encouraged by this light and by the half-open door, he moves softly to it, and, pausing on the threshold, waits, as though in hope of hearing some voice within. But no sound breaks the silence that has fallen on this part of the house.

Still, though no doubt companionless, she may very probably be awake, or else her door would surely have been fastened and her light extinguished. Slowly he advances, and, standing at last inside the room, sees that she is in bed and fast asleep. She had been quite as fast asleep half an hour ago, when Kit had come to take a last glance at her and had inadvertently, or perhaps through fear of waking her in the closing of it, left the door as he found it.

She is wrapped in such sound slumber that his advancing footstep finds no echo in her dreams, and no little faintest flicker of consciousness troubles the serenity of her face as he bends over her.

How beautiful she looks! How tranquil! How *young!* A soft baby flush has crept into her cheeks. Upon them the long curling lashes lie like dainty shadows. Her lips are parted, and through them every now and then comes a deep breath a little heavier than the last, that tells of the utter sweetness and abandonment of her repose. The soft frills of delicate lace around her white throat seem to cling to it for very love's sake, so pretty is their resting-place. A lovely woman is always loveliest in her night-gown, and Doris is specially so in hers.

She has *not* got one hand under her cheek (people never have unless they court a cramp), and her hair, I regret to say, is not unbound. On the contrary, her pretty locks, "oundy and crips" and bright as burnished gold, are coiled back softly and loosely behind her head, leaving her ear, so like a pale-pink shell, to be distinctly seen.

The wounded arm is lying outside the coverlet, the sleeve

of the night-gown having been cut away to the shoulder, so that the fair rounded flesh lies naked, except where the linen bandages cover the injured part. Her little palm is turned upwards in a helpless, tender fashion that appeals to his very heart.

How calm she looks! how full of peace!—almost as calm and peaceful as if the assassin's bullet had swerved in a degree and found a resting-place within her breast. A cold shuddering horror takes possession of him as this thought presses forward, and a longing to waken her, to hear her voice again, to break the silence that surrounds her and has now grown positively oppressive, grows within him.

What a perfectly faultless face it is! Even he (who most certainly is not in love with her,—of this he assures himself several times) cannot but confess so much. He tries in vain to find a blemish: her arm, her hand, her sheeny hair, her rose-red lips, are all so faultless

> "That never formed by Nature
> Was such another thing y-sey!"

How terribly quiet she is now! Hardly she seems to breathe; at all hazards he will waken her! He will——

Slowly she comes back to life. Slowly her eyes, wandering from one object to another, rest at last on his. For a moment (her spirit not having altogether returned to her from its travels in those mystic regions where Somnus holds his sway) they so rest contentedly, unsurprised, and then

> "The eloquent blood spoke in her cheeks,
> And so distinctly wrought
> Ye might have almost said her body thought."

Remembrance comes to her, and with it a start, and a little nervous, if natural, clutch at the bedclothes.

"You!" she says, and pauses.

"Yes. I was unhappy about you. How could I be otherwise? And I felt I should come to see for myself how you were. Just now you were looking so calm, so lifeless, that I was frightened, and was almost going to wake you purposely, when you unclosed your eyes. You are not very ill, are you?" anxiously.

"I am not ill at all," says Doris, rather resentfully.

"You can't be altogether well, can you, after all you have suffered? I have been so miserable about you ever since,"—he really *is* looking very miserable, as he stands gazing down at her with gentle pity in his handsome eyes, —"and now, by coming to see you, I have only done you harm instead of good. But for my untimely visit, perhaps, you would still be sound asleep, and free from—— Is your arm hurting you very much?"

"No. Oh, no," with lowered lids.

"You are angry with me because I have awakened you?"

A little half smile creeps over her face, which she tries to hide by drawing up the sheet over her mouth, but her eyes betray her, and give him courage.

"I am not angry," she says, with an attempt at severity; but it is a failure.

"Then you will tell me how you really are. And you will tell me, too, that you forgive me for coming here"—a faint accentuation on the "here"—"to inquire for you, without permission?"

"I am better, and I forgive you," returns she, demurely, still glancing at him from beneath the protective bed-clothes. "It is late: go away."

"I'm going," says Clontarf. But it is a mere figure of speech, as he doesn't move a muscle. "Who bandaged your arm?"

"Monica." Then, with a sudden show of interest, that brings her chin from under the protection, "Where is Monica now?"

"In bed, I hope."

"And you?"

"I'm here," says Clontarf.

"That I know," returns she, severely. "I meant—that is—where are the others?"

"Oh!" says Clontarf. "Well, you see, it seemed hardly worth while now to think of anything but getting up; and, besides, Brian wants me to help him guard his prisoners."

"Prisoners?"

"Yes. Didn't you hear of our second capture?"

"No; no; I have heard nothing."

She has risen on her good elbow in the excitement of the moment, and is regarding him with great wide eyes of expectation.

"At that rate, I may as well sit down and tell you all about it," says Donat, cheerfully, and, drawing a chair near her bedside, he does sit down, and gives her a clear and succinct account of the late skirmish, and the wretched Con's subjection.

"Poor man! and is his arm really broken?"

"Yes, really. Just above the elbow. It might have been worse for him, you know. But, after all, though I felt very bloodthirsty then, I am rather glad now Brian did not send him to his last account."

"Oh! Brian should be thankful too. Unhappy man. a broken arm must be horrible! I need not think about my little scratch any more."

"*I* shall always think of it."

"Until you forget it."

"That will be never."

"Never is a long day."

"It would take a very long day indeed to make me forget the service this little hand has done me,"—he touches the bandage lightly. "Poor, poor arm!" he says, softly, and, stooping, presses his lips to it very gently just above the linen strips that bind it.

She shrinks from him as he does this, and makes an effort to draw the arm he has caressed beneath the bedclothes, but, finding the attempt hurts her, desists.

She is now looking pale, and very tired.

"Ah! I have kept you talking too long," says Clontarf, rising hurriedly. "Now I shall leave you. Good-night. You will try to sleep again, will you not? and forget that I was thoughtless enough to disturb you."

"I shall try to sleep. Yes."

"But not to forget my thoughtlessness: is that what you mean?" glancing at her earnestly.

"I don't want to forget that," replies she, steadily, but with a burning blush.

A little pause ensues, and then—

"May I come to see you to-morrow?" asks he, in a low voice.

"Yes,"—rather lower.

"Good-night again, then." He is looking down upon her, and she is looking up at him. Their eyes meet. He hesitates, colors warmly, and then, with a shy determination, stoops and kisses her on her lips.

He has left the room before she has time either to recover from her surprise or to ask herself if she is angry. Certainly she is not *very* angry. The pressure of his lips is still on hers; she can still see his face as he bent over her. There was a charm even in the very shyness he had betrayed. No, no, she is not angry, but still——

She will sleep. She will forget it all; why let her mind dwell upon a foolish passing action, born of mere impulsiveness? Putting out her hand, she extinguishes the lamp at her bedside, and then for the first time knows that morning is at hand.

Through the closed shutters rush the first faint streaks of light: even the drawn curtains cannot altogether keep out these triumphant heralds of the coming day. "The breezy call of incense-breathing morn" comes to her from outside, though as yet indistinctly, sleepily, travelling to her as it were from afar, over barren tree-tops and frozen lawns, but drawing ever nearer and nearer.

An unacknowledged desire to get away from her own thoughts suggests to her to rise, even though all the rest of

the household be still wrapped in slumber. It must be nearly seven o'clock. What a long, long night it has been! Rising with some difficulty, because of her injured arm, she crosses the room in her bare feet, and, drawing the curtains aside, flings wide the shutters, and looks out.

It is still almost dark, and day is only a hope—a promise—rather than a fulfilment; but even as she gazes upward a crimson flush leaps into the sky, and a thrill of light, newborn, makes tremulous with life each leaf and branch, and snow-crowned hill, and rushing stream swollen with winter's rains.

By indescribable degrees all grow distinct, until at last even the side-walk, some distance from her window, is made plain to her by the growing brightness of the great god of day.

Her eyes are idly travelling up this walk, when two people moving over it attract her notice. They hurry swiftly by, pass behind the laurustinus, and are gone. After them comes another figure, seemingly also in a hurry, and after him two more.

"Surely those two last figures are familiar to me," says Doris, with a little yawn. "They were in the hall last night among the other servants. Where can they be going in such hot haste at this unearthly hour? Dear me!"—glancing backwards with a shiver at her cold grate,—"I wish one of them would come here and light my fire. What a perishing morning!"

She shivers again, and finally runs back to her warm bed in self-defence, though hopeless that slumber now will visit her. But Sleep—that coyest of maidens—because uncourted comes to her now, and, taking her in her arms, lulls her to sweetest rest.

It seems to her that only a minute can have elapsed since she lay down, before she again opens her eyes to find Monica bending over her, a cup of tea in her hand.

"Ah! you have had a nice sleep," she says. "I am so glad you woke naturally,—that is, without help from me. But I was sorely tempted to shake you, as I was afraid if you slept much longer your tea would be cold, and—h'm—there might be a difficulty about getting you another cup in a hurry. How is your poor arm?"

"I hardly feel it. Is that my tea? How nice! And how sweet of you to bring it to me yourself!"

"I've not only brought it, but I have made it," says Monica, with an irrepressible laugh. Her manner is a little peculiar, but Doris, who is still rather sleepy and languid, takes no notice of it. Monica, turning her head towards the door, says, in a louder tone, to some one evidently just outside,—

"You may come in. She is quite awake, and better."

Whereupon Clontarf appears upon the threshold, bearing in one hand some blazing pieces of wood, and in the other a coal-scuttle. He looks flushed and important, and walks straight to the fireplace as though time is an object.

"Your servant, ma'am," he says to his wife, in passing, and then proceeds to lay the lighted wood in the grate and pile coals on the top of them.

Doris, who had grown rather red on his unexpected entrance, is now so filled with amazement at his subsequent proceedings that she can do nothing but stare at him.

"I have been telling Doris," says Monica, gayly, "that I have not only brought her her tea this morning, but that I have actually made it myself."

"I think you might allow me some of the honor and glory," says Clontarf, in an injured tone, desisting for a moment from his effort to make the fire blaze. "But for me and my bellows, I don't believe that vile kettle would ever have condescended to boil. If all kettles are as obstinate as ours, we ought to bless our stars we weren't born kitchen-maids."

"This is hardly the time to bless our stars for that," says Monica, gloomily. "Perhaps it would be better for us now if we had been." Unkindly recollections of that kettle are weighing heavily upon her also.

By this time Doris has partially recovered from the maze of astonishment into which she had fallen.

"What is he doing there?" she says to Monica, pointing to Clontarf, who is now making a cherub of himself in his endeavors to coax the fire into a flame.

"Lighting your fire," says Monica.

"With Land League timber," puts in Clontarf. "They kindly left it on the hall door-steps last night. I'm sorry I can't congratulate them upon its excellence. If their ardor was as damp as their firewood, it would be a good thing for us all. Mrs. Desmond, where did we leave the bellows?"

"I think," uncertainly, "the last fire we lit was in the morning-room. Try there."

"It—it's very good of you to take all this trouble about me," says Lady Clontarf, gazing in deep perplexity at her husband, who is now standing facing her. "But—where are the servants?"

"*Here!*" cries Monica, tragically, flinging wide her arms. "Here's all the servants of my uncle's house, and all the attendants too. I'm cook; Lord Clontarf is house-maid; Kit is parlor-maid; Dicky Browne general factotum. There is no one left to us since early dawn save Bridget and poor old Brady."

At this, Doris, forgetful of her wounded arm, her husband's presence,—everything,—springs up in bed and stares at Monica.

"You don't mean," she says, "to tell me——"

"Yes, I do," says Monica.

"I am to understand that——"

"Yes, you are," says Monica.

"Good gracious!" says Lady Clontarf. "Then you really and truly have been——"

"Boycotted!" interposes her husband, in a solemn tone that might have been impressive but for the black smudge on the tip of his nose.

Doris sinks back on her pillow.

"Oh! what fun!" she says, at last, breaking into a ringing laugh.

CHAPTER XXV.

"Deceit, weeping, and spinning, God doth give
To women kindly, while that they may live."

It is all just so. Every servant has disappeared,—frightened into submission to the Land League, and dishonesty to their master, by threats of death, not only distributed by hand but posted upon the yard gates and kitchen doors. With the dew of morning they had all melted away without warning or word of parting to The Desmond or one of his household. Two, indeed, have remained out of the whole lot, preferring to incur the anger of the League rather than the disdain of their master. These two are Bridget and the old butler. Dicky Browne's man, who is English, is also here; and about nine o'clock an old woman called Moloney is discovered in a back kitchen.

Mrs. Moloney is a person not to be despised. In her earlier years she had been "runner" to the family, and in later years, when running was impossible to her, she had been accorded insensibly a certain nondescript position in the household, such as fire-poker in ordinary to the kitchen range, and so forth.

She has lived in Coole for the last forty years off and on, and now pathetically declares her inability to find her way out of the lower regions. She is a bony person, with red lines round her eyes, and a nose that her late husband was wont to say could "pick a pipe." It is certainly sharp enough to pierce even this dark saying.

"If you will stay with us, Mrs. Moloney," says Monica,

addressing this remarkable woman an hour later, "I need hardly say how grateful we shall be——"

"Not at all, me dear,—not at all," says Mrs. Moloney.

"But—but—I'm afraid if the Land Leaguers discover you are giving us any assistance they may do you a serious injury later on. They may even take your life!"

"Sorra fear of it! Arrah, what on airth would they gain be lettin' the blood out of an ould skin like mine?" says Mrs. Moloney. "Be aisy, honey; the grave isn't dug for me yet, an' 'tisn't the like o' thim spalpeens as'll have the diggin' of it."

"But, even if they don't kill you, still they may harm you in many ways."

"Let 'em!" says Mrs. Moloney, with a spirit that defies age.

"Oh, Mrs. Moloney, if they were to murder you!"

"Arrah, for what?" says Mrs. Moloney.

"Aren't you afraid of them?" asks Monica, gazing at her with growing admiration.

"Divil a bit, me dear," says Mrs. Moloney, with a sniff of defiance, placing her arms akimbo.

This answer is conclusive, and she is elected cook upon the spot! Luncheon, however, to say nothing of dinner later on, proves her knowledge of the arts of roasting and boiling to be perhaps a degree more eccentric than satisfactory. There is indeed a freshness, a novelty, about her style that just at first is a trifle perplexing.

"Praties" (so she calls those succulent roots) are indeed a *spécialité* with her, and under her treatment become a great and unqualified success; but with a fowl of any description she struggles unavailingly, not only in the murdering but in the cooking of it.

A loin of mutton in her hands is found to possess intricacies hitherto unknown; a sirloin of beef becomes a conundrum unanswerable. Being, however, the sole thing in the kitchen that has clung to her in her necessity, Monica clings to her in return, and makes much of her, and treats her with a respect largely mingled with gratitude, that goes deep into the heart of the poor old soul.

Just before luncheon, Vera and Sir Watkyn, having heard the news of last night's attack through the police (who had been summoned by The Desmond directly after breakfast to hear a full, true, and particular account of the fray), drive over to Coole.

Finding Doris dressed, and lying on a couch in the drawing-room, Vera flings her arms around her and gazes at her long and wistfully.

"Oh, Dody! If anything worse had happened to you!" she says.

There is a little break in her voice, genuine tears in her lovely eyes.

"Well, if there had, I suppose I should be in bed and not here," says Doris, laughing lightly; but, as she laughs, she leans forward and kisses her sister again. "But it is really only the merest scratch."

"Will it mark your arm?"—very anxiously, this, and with a shuddering glance at the bandage.

"No, I am sure it cannot."

"Not even a scar?"

"Oh, no."

"What a comfort!" says Vera, still distressed, but with a sigh of relief. "It would be such a terrible thing, especially now, when sleeves are unknown."

She is looking almost angelic. She is very pale, and her large blue eyes are dim with tears. "Lo! pity runneth soon in gentle heart." Kneeling beside the couch, where Doris lies, with her whole face full of a strange tenderness, she seems so fresh, so young, so full-filled with softest sympathy, that it is no wonder if Gerald Burke, gazing at her from the other end of the room, gives passion rein, and tells himself she is a creature not only to live for but to die for.

Whether Sir Watkyn Wylde is of the same opinion I know not, but certainly he keeps very close to the little sympathizer, and now, stooping over her, lays his hand somewhat familiarly upon her arm. He is spasmodically lively as ever, but is difficult of recognition, being almost lost in the furred coat in which his valet has shrouded him.

"Remember your promise to me,—your promise not to cry," he succeeds in saying, with a simpering affectation of tenderness: "your eyes were never made for tears."

He has still his hand upon her arm, and she has turned her little flower-like face up to his, with a smile on it, when a dark stern glance comes between him and her, and Burke, with a gesture that is as determined as it is forcible, compels Sir Watkyn to move back a step or two. That the younger man's temper is all but out of his control, may be guessed by the quivering of his nostrils and the deadly pallor of his lips. Yet his voice, which is strangely soft and musical for a man, is low and sweet as ever as he speaks.

"Do not kneel any longer," he says to Vera. "It is fatiguing. Shall I bring you a chair? You look very tired."

"Do I?" says Vera, transferring her smile from Sir Watkyn to him, with a dexterity amazing, and a sense of economy foreign to woman as a rule. "Yes, you are right.

Kneeling *is* fatiguing. Bring me that low chair over there," pointing towards the farthest corner of the room. Her sense of economy is only to be rivalled by her sense of the value of time. "It is such a little chair," she says, with an adorable glance at Lady Clontarf, "that it will let me sit quite close to poor Dody."

All his ill-temper conquered by her grace and sweetness, he turns to obey her. When he is about two yards from her, with his back well turned, she holds out to Sir Watkyn both her pretty fragile hands.

"Help me to get up," she says, rather with her eyes than with her lips, and, as he makes a feint of raising her, she whispers to him something, with an amused shrug and a naughty little *moue*. But long before Burke has turned to come back to her again with the chair indicated, she is standing alone by Doris's side, silent, unsmiling.

"Ah! thank you," she says, prettily, as she sinks into the seat he has brought. "I do feel happier, certainly. And now"—glancing vaguely round her at the others—"I wish somebody would tell me all about last night." She has taken Doris's hand in hers, and is patting it softly.

"I'll tell you," says Dicky Browne, who delights in his own voice; and forthwith he gives her a florid, though terse, account of all that happened from Lady Clontarf's entry into Coole, to the final discomfiture of all their foes.

But Vera takes heed of nothing but the disclosure of Connor's treachery, involving as it does the story of Doris's narrow escape.

"How brave you were!" she says, regarding her sister with earnest admiration. "What courage you displayed! If that had been me, what a sorry part I should have played! It was horrible."

"It was. I certainly never before in all my life felt so frightened. But fright, I am sure, adds to one's wits, instead of taking from them. Dicky,"—turning to Mr. Browne with a soft laugh,—"I don't believe any music I ever heard sounded to me half so sweet as your voice, when you gave way to that naughty expletive just before securing Connor."

"I have naturally a very sweet voice," says Mr. Browne, promptly. "I have been frequently told so. I wonder if Connor thinks as you do? Why didn't we question him on the subject this morning before the police took him into their hospitable keeping?"

"Ah! why, indeed?" says Brabazon.

"Our other prisoner is progressing favorably," says Lord Clontarf, in a low tone. "Dr. Murphy says he may safely be sent home at the end of the week."

"A good thing, too," says Monica, laughing, "as Bridget

is of small use to us whilst he lies up there," with a comprehensive wave of her hand towards some upper part of the house.

"I don't see how we are to feed him," says Brian. "When our present stock of provisions falls short, what on earth is to become of us?"

"I'll be your 'butcher, and baker, and candlestick-maker,'" says Clontarf, laughing, "until they Boycott me for so doing."

"Mrs. Moloney and I have been through the larder and the places below," says Monica, "and we think there is plenty of meat in the house to last, *with economy*, for the next two days."

"And after that the deluge," says Dicky Browne; "or else the esculent roots that she calls 'praties.'"

"Never mind what she calls anything," says Kit: "she is the dearest old woman in the world."

"She shall be presented with the Victoria Cross when this situation has arranged itself," says Mr. Browne. "To myself I have reserved the proud task of pinning it upon her heroic bosom."

"I don't know what we are to do," says Monica, pensively pouring out the tea. Luncheon has come to an end long ago. "This is the last drop of milk in the house, and Bridget doesn't know how to milk cows."

"I do!" says Kit, eagerly. "Monica, let me try by and by, when they are in their stalls."

"You!"

"Yes: Aunt Penelope's cook, Mrs. Ryan, taught me one evening when the milkmaid was laid up with a thorn in her thumb, and I can milk a cow with any one now."

"Oh, Kit, don't say it if you aren't sure!" says Monica, pathetically. "Don't raise our hopes only to dash them again to the ground! The thought that my tea may still be possible to me is almost more than I can bear."

"You just wait and see what I can do," says Miss Beresford, with an encouraging nod.

"It is growing very dark," exclaims Lady Clontarf. "Vera, darling, I think you and Sir Watkyn had better be thinking of home."

"Oh, Dody, I can't bear to leave you!" says Vera. She sighs profoundly, and her eyes fall on Burke. They linger on him so long that one might almost be excused for thinking the words are meant for him. He too is staying at Coole, having taken service there as herdsman.

"You must go home and look after our aunt," says Doris. "I must stay here," laughing, "to look after Monica."

"So must I," says Clontarf.

"What! to look after Monica? Oh, no, don't. Better

look after my Dody," says Vera, with a charming archness, yet with a certain meaning. "You have guarded her very badly up to this, as it seems to me," gently touching her bandaged arm.

"I deserve your reproach," says Clontarf, with a remorseful glance at his wife, who colors faintly, but declines to meet it. "I shall try to do better in future. But now go home, you little scold, while it is yet light, and take Sir Watkyn with you."

"The account of this last disturbance has been too much for him," murmurs Mr. Browne, pensively. "He looks more than usually shattered, and that is saying a great deal. What is it that is amiss with him? I have not quite grasped it yet, but surely his wig is somewhat awry, and his teeth, I fancy, are upside-down. Poor old gentleman! I suppose in his flurry he forgot the right way to put them in."

"Poor Vera, *I* say," murmurs Doris, regretfully, pressing her sister's hand: "it is too bad that you must be left alone at Kilmalooda, with worse than nobody to speak to."

"Auntie *is* a trial, certainly," says Vera, innocently. "But dear Sir Watkyn is very good to me." She looks straight at Doris as she says this,—so straight that Lady Clontarf finds a difficulty in explaining that her "worse than nobody" is not Mrs. Costello, but the good Sir Watkyn himself.

"Can I do anything for you, dearest, before going?" asks Vera, presently.

"No; nothing."

"Ah! but let me do something," caressingly, and with childish persistence.

Doris laughs.

"Well, go and see if there is anything pretty in the conservatory, and bring it to me," she says. "What a baby you are!"

"What an angel!" says Sir Watkyn, who had come up to the group by the lounge before Vera had made her last touching little appeal. As he pays this pretty tribute to her amiability, he gives way to a laugh that he intends to be graceful and airy, but, a senile cough catching him in the middle of it and making a vicious effort to tear his dilapidated frame in pieces, the grace and the airiness rather fall through. Every one tries to look as if he or she is utterly insensible to the fact that a cough is in the room. Nevertheless, all draw breaths of relief when the dangerous sound comes to an end, and they find Sir Watkyn has emerged in safety from it, and may still be dimly seen within his furs, shaken, indeed, but yet (oh, the relief of it!) not cold in death!

Vera alone seems unimpressed by the greatness of his escape.

"Ah, Sir Watkyn, you must not make me vain!" she says, archly,—*à propos* his late remark,—shaking at him playfully a slender forefinger; after which she runs lightly away to the conservatory to bring Doris the promised blossom.

She finds there not only it, but Gerald Burke!

She has stepped down the two steps leading into the conservatory before she sees him.

"Ah! you!" smiles she then, finding retreat impossible. "No!"—gayly—"you mustn't think I knew you were here, really! It was the happiest chance!"

"I have almost forgotten the meaning of the word happiness," says Burke, passionately, advancing towards her and taking prisoner both her hands. "Surely there is such a thing as a hell upon earth. I have been in it since last night. They said then that—that—you were letting that contemptible old fool inside make love to you. Tell me they lied!"

"Fie! what an ugly word! And how you hurt my wrists." She writhes a little, as though in pain, and then is free from him.

"He is rich, titled, but I will not believe you could give your sweet self for such poor returns," says Burke, wretchedly. "Say I am right. That I at least have not wronged you. That your heart is——"

"No! You have not wronged me, indeed," interrupts she, hastily. "Sir Watkyn has no hold upon my heart. But," reproachfully, "I think you should not use ugly language towards him, poor man! No, my heart is given away long since."

"Vera, is that true?"

He has grown very white and is looking at her with all his soul in his eyes. With a passionate hope, sad as it is great, he sees himself the object of her heart's affection, whilst she, in this instant of thought, sees a sofa, a pale pure face, a soft, white, bandaged arm! She sees Doris, the one deep emotion of her life!

"Quite true," she says, lightly.

"Then they spoke falsely?"

"Does that require an answer?" asks she, with a dainty smile, and a shrug of her pretty shoulders. "They, whoever they are, spoke as imagination dictated, but—could they know?"

"Even if they had known, if they could have seen into your very heart of hearts, say that still their words would have been untrue, that you could find no pleasure in adulation proffered you by that old man."

"Indeed I should not," says Vera, sweetly, standing back from him, and clasping her hands behind her. "Why, what silly thought have you got into your head now?"

"Say rather maddening!" exclaims Burke, pressing his hands to his forehead. Then suddenly his mood changes. "Darling, darling," he says, with passionate fondness, "why do I wrong you even in thought?"

"Ah! why, indeed?" asks Vera, with a plaintive sigh and a very clever drooping of her lips, that any one might mistake for sadness.

"You love me," goes on Burke, feverishly. "Some day you will marry me, and then all will be well. Is it not so?"

There is a faint pause. Vera, with a slight frown upon her pretty forehead, is evidently considering some momentous question. Yes! Let her have time! She is only a child, when all is told. This sublime thing called Love must as yet be a sealed mystery to her, to be slowly and carefully unravelled!

"'Some day,—some day,'" her voice breaking into song, stirs the silence that he had believed to be solemn: "No,—that is not it:—'Some day.' Ah! Yes! now I have it. What a dear little song that is! isn't it?"

"*Answer me*," says Burke, in a stifled tone.

"Hm?" says Vera, lifting her eyes questioningly to his in loveliest bewilderment.

"Tell me, *now*, here, that some time in the future you will be my wife."

She laughs, not unkindly or in an irritating fashion, but as a child might, with pretty defiance. She moves a little farther from him too, until she is almost at the door.

"You musn't bring me to task as though I were a baby," she says, saucily, with a lovely pout. "If you cannot trust me 'all in all,' why, don't trust me at all: that's all." She shakes her golden head at him as she says this, and, with a last provoking glance, disappears through the door-way, and so escapes from him.

"Yet I feel she loves me," says Burke to himself, as he strides agitatedly up and down the floor of the conservatory. "I know it. For me alone she smiles as she smiled just now. And that pretty hint about her heart being given away long since,—*how* could I doubt her? She may be a little bit *coquette*,—the *rôle* becomes her,—but her heart is surely mine."

Who shall say there is no joy to be found in the Paradise of Fools?

CHAPTER XXVI.

"Performed hath the sun his arc diurn."

"O! false homely hewe,
Like to the adder in bosom sly, untrue.
God shield us allē from your acquaintance."

"HAS any one turned in a cow for me?" asks Miss Beresford, when dinner has come to a sorrowful end. This business-like method of approaching the subject is felt to be very effective. Every one looks at her with curiosity, mingled with awe. Here is the heroic one who, without a qualm of fear, is prepared to tackle the untamable cow.

"Cows kick, don't they?" asks Mr. Browne, who has an unquenchable thirst for knowledge.

"Not when they are spancelled," returns Miss Beresford, with growing dignity. That she is the heroine of the coming hour is well known to her. Very few young ladies, except Miss Bence Jones, have ever been equal to the milking of a cow.

"Spancelled! Ah! quite so! yes! oh! yes, of course,—exactly," says Mr. Browne, who hasn't the faintest notion what a spancel means.

They are still in the dining-room, having only just risen from table, and, in spite of Mrs. Moloney's dishes, are in the gayest spirits.

"I turned in two cows, just before dinner," says Gerald Burke, gravely. "I never had such a job in my life; they didn't like being taken away from the others; and the others, when they found I wasn't going to bring them in, were very resentful indeed; but I won the day."

"Well, let us start," says Dicky Browne.

"I haven't got my pail yet," says Kit.

Brady, the old butler, being interviewed, says he thinks *he* knows that Mrs. Moloney knows where the late milkmaid kept her goods and chattels, and presently returning in triumph with a milk-pail, lays it upon the carpet. Everybody looks at it with keen and growing interest.

"I don't believe you know the proper way to carry it," says Lord Clontarf, at last.

"*Don't* I," says Kit, scornfully: "that's all *you* know about it. Do you suppose I haven't seen that 'Where are you going, my pretty maid?' picture? Now, look here."

She has pinned up the tail of her pale evening gown; her sleeves are very short, her neck a little bare. Taking up

the milk-pail, she places it under her arm with quite a professional touch, and glances from one to another of them, as if awaiting judgment.

The trial is a very one-sided affair: there are no arguments. Every one is for the defence; and, in fine, judge, jury, witnesses, and all declare her faultless.

"Why don't we get up private theatricals?" says Monica (who is a devoted admirer of Kit's). "With Kit as 'Moya,' in 'The Shaughraun,' we could bring down any house. In her present *rôle* she would be irresistible."

"In any *rôle*," says Brabazon, stoutly; whereupon the new milkmaid gives way to a frivolous laugh, and drops him a courtesy.

"Don't you think you had enough private theatricals last night to last you for some time?" asks The Desmond, turning to Monica with an amused glance.

"They were a failure," says she, contemptuously, thinking of their foes' undignified retreat.

"I thought them a splendid success," replies he, thinking of their own undisputed victory.

At this moment Brian Desmond, who has been for the past few minutes regarding Dicky Browne with unaffected amazement, turns abruptly to Kit.

"Congratulate yourself doubly, my dear girl," he says: "you have achieved a second success within the past half-hour, even greater than your first. Your having triumphantly proved your appearance to be precisely like that of an ordinary common milk-girl" (here Kit advances towards him with a menacing gesture) "is nothing when compared with the fact that you have stricken Dicky Browne dumb!"

"Why, that's true, Dicky? What has become of your voice?" asks Monica, with affected concern.

"It has sunk into nothingness before Kit's great personal attractions," says Brian. "I have taken careful note of it, and it is precisely four minutes by my watch since last he opened his lips. What a cruel misfortune has befallen us! Are we never to hear those beloved, if slightly idiotic, utterances again? Do not give way altogether, Dicky. Try to speak, if only *one* word."

Mr. Browne instantly makes a fearful contortion, and flings his arms wildly into space.

"I have heard," says Brian, sadly, "that severe and unlimited pinching is good for this sort of thing."

Here he goes for Dicky. Dicky, still madly gesticulating, beats a determined retreat. When they have got once round the dinner-table, Brian gives him a last chance.

"Then tell us instantly," he says, "impostor that you are, your opinion of that peerless milkmaid in the doorway."

"I think her such 'an agreeable girl,'" says Mr. Browne, gravely, "that if I were Grossmith—I beg pardon, I mean the Lord Chancellor—I wouldn't 'give her away' at any price!"

"Now for the cow!" says Monica. "Neil," turning to Brabazon, who is in high favor once more, "will you go with her?"

"Let us all go," suggests Dicky, who is a very sociable young man.

"Yes, let us," says Gerald Burke.

"Can I go?" asks Lady Clontarf, with an appealing glance all round.

"Certainly not, my dear," says The Desmond, decisively. "Do you think I should allow you to go out in the frost with that arm? No, no! Even if your husband gave you permission (it is useless your making eyes at him like that), I, as your host, should forbid you to stir."

"You are a tyrant," says Doris, smiling.

"So my tenants tell me. Monica, my sweetheart, come here and make Lady Clontarf comfortable on her sofa before you go. She will stay here with the old man whilst you are away; and she and I will have our wine nice and snug and comfortable together."

"Would any one have believed him so artful," says Dicky, *sotto voce*, "to inveigle her unto a *tête-à-tête* like this, and under the pretence, too, of its being all for her own good?"

"Take your revolvers with you, boys," says The Desmond, when he has shaken his fist at Dicky. "There's no knowing where they may come in handy. Are you pleasanter now, my dear?" as he sees Doris's sofa wheeled closer to the fire, and a little table placed at her elbow. "Brian, bring the curaçoa, and give Lady Clontarf some in that little glass. She is bound to keep me company in some way."

Presently all the others, led by their milkmaid and Brabazon, emerge into the crisp stillness of the winter night, well wrapped in furs and shawls. As they make their way to the stalls where the cows are usually kept, they tread on brilliant sparks of moonlit ice. Above their head the stars are twinkling merrily; and, even as they gaze upon the dark-blue firmament, a cloud creeps by, and from behind it "the sudden goddess enters, tall and white," and glances at the earth, and smiles her cold calm smile, until, as if by magic, fields and trees and ivied walls are bathed in silver light.

"What a nice clear night!" says Mr. Browne, just as they come to a rather eerie corner, full of mysterious shadows that must be passed. "Any fellow taking aim at one just here couldn't fail to hit his mark."

"Oh, Dicky! don't be horrid," says Monica, with a shudder.

"Has Kit fainted?" asks Mr. Browne, after another pause, that has brought them into "a darkness that may be felt," occasioned by a thick interlacing on either side of myrtles and laurels. "Or has she been made away with? She is singularly silent."

"I don't think it is a sign of wisdom to be always talking," retorts Kit, from somewhere in the far distance. "I was thinking."

"Say you were frightened, rather,"—tantalizingly; "and no wonder, too, considering all things."

"Frightened!"—indignantly: "why should I be frightened?"

"Do you mean to tell me you *aren't* frightened?"

"Certainly I do. I never felt braver in my life."

"Very praiseworthy! very! admirable!" says Mr. Browne, sinking into an audible soliloquy. "To 'assume a virtue, if you have it not,' is as good a thing as one can do."

"I am assuming nothing," declares Kit, promptly, refusing to acknowledge his soliloquy. "I am just as little frightened as you are."

"If you are even *half* as frightened as I am," says Mr. Browne, sadly, "you must be a sorry spectacle. Mrs. Moloney feelingly and graphically described to me this afternoon her sensations during the row last night. She said her 'j'ints was all of a thrimble.' I can appreciate her English now. My 'j'ints is all of a thrimble' at this moment, and *I*"—with gentle reproach—"am not ashamed to own it."

"Oh, dear! how I hate dark places!" says Monica, making a little dash into the moonlight as they come to the end of their shadowy corner. "Kit," she goes on, a moment later, peering into the house where the two cows are stalled, "are you sure you can do it?"

"You shall see for yourself," says Miss Beresford.

There is a little delay while she draws off her rings and bangles and confides them to Brabazon's keeping. Then she seats herself upon the three-legged stool, placed ready for her, and commences operations.

Every one leans forward, and watches her with breathless interest. Yes, hers was no idle boast. Softly, musically, falls the milk into the expectant pail.

"And is that all?" says Mr. Browne, at last, breaking the magic silence. "Bless me! did I brave all the dangers of that awful corner to see so little? A simple up-and-down mechanical movement of the hands! Pouf! why, any fool could do that."

"Try it," says Kit, promptly, getting up from her rustic seat.

"I will!" retorts he, valiantly. "I'll see what I can do."

He does see what he can do, and the cow, she sees what she can do. That she can kick with a mighty vigor she proves in exactly fifty seconds. In that short space of time she plants Mr. Browne many yards away from her, with his head—but nothing else—in the milk-pail.

When he slowly emerges from it, shaking from his tightly-cropped head the snowy milk that Kit with her first touch had placed in the fatal pail, not a sound greets him. Assuring himself (and feeling gratified by the assurance) that they are all speechless with terror, he looks round him. It is a melancholy end to his short-lived gratification to find that they are speechless with laughter.

"Oh! look at him! *look* at him!" cries Kit, in a very agony of delight.

"Dry your head, old man, in a hurry, or we shall have to bring you in and thaw your milk-icicles before the fire," says Brian.

But even their heartless mirth is powerless to subdue Mr. Browne's heroic spirit.

"Well, after all, I'm not a fool," he says, mildly. "I've established that fact. And," creeping towards the door, with a careful view to keeping clear of the cow as he goes by, "I don't think milking is much of a game, after all. Besides,"—here he pauses, and rubs himself surreptitiously (he has had a really bad fall) and looks at Monica,—"I'm awfully bad," he concludes, ruefully.

"Come in-doors with me," says Mrs. Desmond, good-naturedly. "It is quite horrid out here,—so cold! Kit, Mr. Brabazon will look after you, perhaps, and as for the rest—Well, I'm going in!"

Something in her tone tells the others that Kit and Brabazon will not require them any longer, and one by one they all file off towards the house, Dicky Browne going among them "delicately," like Agag, laughing consumedly now and then at his late misfortune.

"If it is cold for them, it must be cold for you," says Brabazon to Kit, anxiously, when they have gone.

"I have felt it warmer in June, certainly," returns she, laughing. "But I am not freezing, if you mean that. My occupation keeps me warm. Lazy boys like you must expect to suffer if you will not 'sing for your supper.'"

"You won't be very long, will you?" asks he, still anxiously. How beautiful but how slender a creature she looks, sitting there with the moonlight playing riot in her hair!

"Not two minutes longer. This much milk will be

plenty for us,"—peering into the pail. "Don't you think so?"

"I am sure of it. Why waste it?" says Mr. Brabazon, with a contemptible pretence at economy, meant to hide his desire to restore her to the warm fireside within. "We may want more to-morrow."

"Well, that's it. I don't know if she will give more to-morrow on account of stopping now," says Miss Beresford, doubtfully. "Never mind,"—brightly,—"we can try it. Good-by, prettty old cow! the morning will bring me to you again." She strokes the animal's back affectionately. But the cow, solemnly, reproachfully chewing the cud, takes no notice of her, being lost in angry amazement at the absence of her usual milking-meal of cabbages or turnips.

Kit steps out into the moonlight, pail in hand.

"See! doesn't it look white and creamy?" she says, pointing to the milk.

"Almost as fair as yourself. Now, 'where are you going, my pretty maid,' with that heavy thing upon your arm? Let me carry it for you."

"No, no," says Kit, defending her pail from the touch of the sacrilegious Philistine. "I want to enact the 'pretty maid' in reality, and so I must bear my own burden."

"My darling, your burden is greater than you can bear. See! you are staggering beneath it. Give it to me."

"I want to create a sensation before I die. I want to carry my pail right into the dining-room, and lay it at Uncle George's feet, and demand my wages of him or Monica."

"Well, so you shall. But let me take it for you to the door."

"And you will certainly give it to me there?"

"Certainly."

"Because,"—hesitating still, and holding the pail back from him,—"I have set my heart on showing them that I can actually——"

A whirring noise! A sudden shock that thrills cruelly through all her slender frame, and then a quick awakening to the fact that her pail has been treacherously dashed from her hand, and that all her foaming milk, of which she had been so proud a moment since, is now rushing helplessly over the snow-clad ground, and round and round the heavy stone that has been maliciously hurled at her through the air. Whose hand had cast it? The yard is silent as death! Not a breath, not the faintest rustle, betrays the presence of a third person, yet the deadly missile had not surely descended from heaven or been upheaved by the patient earth. A murderous hand it must have

been, as the slightest inclination of the stone to the right must infallibly have shattered the pretty arm, or laid the small stately head in the snow. But then it is hardly murder nowadays in Ireland, but rather a meritorious act, to rid the world of a landlord, or one of the landlord class, or at all events a Protestant!

For a full minute neither Kit nor Brabazon says one word; then—

"Dastards! cowards!" says Miss Beresford between her little clinched teeth, turning and facing the direction from which the stone most probably has come. A stone wall runs right round three sides of the yard, and there are certain abutments and projections about it that might make it easy for any one on the road outside to mount it and leisurely survey the yard. There is one particular point, where any one standing on a second lower wall beyond might easily scan the whole interior, and take deadly aim at any one's back without fear of discovery or revenge. Upon this point Brabazon bends his gaze.

He mutters something that wouldn't look well on paper, and then turns hastily to Kit.

"This is no place for you," he says, sternly: "I should not have allowed you to come. I was *mad* when I thought that a woman at least might be sacred to these brutal Leaguers. You are frightened. Go in. I can see you safely housed from this. Alone I shall feel freer, and I swear——"

"Frightened! Go in!" repeats she, with ineffable disdain, drawing up her beautiful figure to its full height. "Have you forgotten, then, that Monica is waiting for her tea, and that there is another cow in the stall?"

"You will not attempt it again," says Brabazon, entreatingly, knowing his entreaty will be vain, and that she *will* attempt it, in spite of anything he may say. Though honestly nervous about her, he is, for all that, undisguisedly proud of the dauntless spirit she betrays.

"What!" she says, stamping her little foot impatiently upon the ground, "you would have me go in empty-handed! You would let *them*,"—with a glance round her—"glory in their triumph? No," she says, throwing back her haughty head, and regarding him almost angrily. "I shall let them see what stuff they have to fight, when even the women defy them! Take up my pail, and follow me."

Her lovely mouth is compressed, her nostrils dilated, her great soft eyes seem to flash fire in the moonlight, as, with a step determined but without haste, she walks up the yard again, and again enters the cows' stalls.

It is long past the usual milking-hour, and the second cow lows gratefully as she feels the touch of the soft little

fingers on her dewy udder. The thankful sound changes Kit's mood on the instant. She laughs lightly.

"What a temper I was in!" she says, shrugging her shoulders. "You hear this poor thing, how gratefully she welcomes me. It is an ill wind that blows nobody good. She is glad of my return."

"What will become of the other poor creatures in the fields?" asks he, feeling sorry for the necessarily neglected cattle, deserted by their usual attendants.

"The Land Leaguers will have them milked under cover of night, down in the woods, and, mixing their milk with the milk of their own cows, will thus increase their stock of butter for market next Friday. It brings them in an occasional sum; and the money thus made is forwarded to the general League fund, and from that to the pockets of certain individuals, who, as you know, lead merry lives on the strength of the fund, forgetful of the starving peasant. What a sad mockery it all is!"

"What a monstrous swindle!" says Brabazon.

"I hope the poor cows won't suffer from the cold," says Kit, with a sigh. "I really do think, Neil, that to-morrow, if no help is forthcoming, all you men ought to drive them up, in the afternoon, and let them have as much hay and—and—turnips and things as they can eat."

"We will," says Brabazon, who would have said just the same if she had ordered him instantly to the North Pole.

"Now for our second venture," she says, presently, rising, and looking at him with a smile.

"You go first, and not too fast. I'll follow you, walking backwards," says Brabazon, his fingers on the revolver inside his coat. "If they attempt to insult you this time, it shan't be with impunity."

"I don't suppose they will attack us a second time," says Kit.

She walks steadily down the yard, Brabazon, with his face to the dangerous parts of the wall, and his eyes keenly travelling from right to left, following slowly.

They have already passed the stables, when the veriest ghost of a sound attracts his notice. Still walking backward, but even slower now, he fixes his glance upon that point where, as I have said, a shorter wall at the other side allows any one standing on it to get a good view of the yard within, by drawing himself upwards a few inches by his hands.

It is a brilliant moonlight night, and the very mosses upon the stones are visible. Gazing intently at the suspected spot, Neil sees at last a large hand appear on the top of the wall, as though the owner of it is clinging to it

with the intent to raise his body. Then another hand follows the first, with something in it.

Quick as lightning, without even a word of warning to Kit, Brabazon levels his revolver and fires. There is a yell, a groan, then the dull thud of a fallen body, and the rattle of a stone down this side of the wall, and then again silence, the more awful for that shrill scream of pain.

"To the house quickly, Kit: there may be others, with worse weapons than stones," says Brabazon, catching her hand. Then, seeing how pale she is, "My darling, I have terrified you," he says, remorsefully, "but an instant's delay would have been fatal: once his head appeared, he would have caught the situation at a glance, and either have escaped altogether, or else I should have killed him. I didn't want to kill him."

"Oh, no! no!" says Kit, shuddering. "Oh, what a terrible cry he gave!"

"Never mind that now. Can you run? Shall I carry you? Are you faint?"

"I think I shan't faint till I get in," says Miss Beresford, in a trembling voice, and forthwith takes to her heels, and runs swiftly to the house, though indeed she is almost sobbing with nervous agitation.

Inside they had heard the sound of the revolver, and now they all meet them round the corner, consternation on their faces.

A few words explain everything.

"Mrs. Desmond, take Kit in with you, and give her something," says Neil, hurriedly. "And, Dicky and Brian, come with me, to see if we can't secure the fellow."

But when they reach the spot outside the walls where the wounded man must have fallen, nothing is to be seen. All is silent as the grave, and as deserted. There are traces of torn underwood and parted briers, a few footsteps, a little blood in one spot, but nothing more. Going on to the road, they find nothing there either to help them in their search, and presently go back to the house, foiled for this night at least.

CHAPTER XXVII.

"Folk see all day, and eke men read in stories,
That after sharpe stourës, be victries."

In this state of siege they continue until the end of the week, the garrison being provisioned by their friends at Kilmalooda, Vera and Mrs. Costello, the latter showing quite a bloodthirsty desire to circumvent the foe, and by the Misses Blake, of Moyne, in spite of liberal threats of vengeance posted by the Leaguers upon the doors and walls and pillars of these two houses. The marquis, too, has betrayed much youthful animation on the subject, sending over many useless articles of consumption for the besieged household, and coming every day himself, with small *patés* in his pockets for Monica and Kit and Lady Clontarf, who is now almost well, but determined to see the quarrel to its bitter end.

At the close of this uncomfortable week the prisoner Con is declared by the doctor sufficiently convalescent to be returned secretly to his own home,—an opinion that is greeted with deep thankfulness by all at Coole, except perhaps Bridget, the care of an invalid, added to their other difficulties, having been almost more than they can bear. Naturally, the deadly silence that has been kept about Con ever since the night of the memorable attack on Coole has caused his people a great and growing anxiety. They had left him lying there upon the snowy ground, stiffening in death, as they then believed, and next morning had awaited with beating hearts the tidings of how his lifeless body had been secured by the police, and so on.

But no such tidings had come to them. Then the horrible thought that he had not been quite dead when they deserted him suggested itself, and in fear and grief they had searched every ditch and brake within a mile of Coole, dreading, yet hoping, to find him in some secret spot, believing that, with the common instinct of the stricken animal, he had crawled away to any poor shelter that might help to hide him from the vengeance of his foes.

But in vain they searched; and then their hearts sank within them, and they asked themselves in sickly whispers whether he might not be still alive, and within the walls of Coole, being nursed back to life with a view to placing him in the dock on his recovery. And, if so, how would it be with them,—the rest of the gang?—with many more

guilty than he? Even now he may be pressed for details of that wretched night's work,—for names of persons connected with it; and, lying there powerless, helpless, friendless, almost at death's door, would he have the strength to refuse information, on all points? Ay! there was the rub!

Frightened, cowed, uncertain, they went about their labors from morn to night, never knowing what misfortune the day might bring forth.

The two servants—Bridget and old Brady—who had remained faithful to The Desmond despite the Land League orders were impossible to get at for purposes of interrogation. Even though threatening letters had been conveyed to Brady, nothing had come of them, he remaining stanch and taking no notice whatever of the death-breathing missives. To be exact, however, he was all through in total ignorance of the presence of Con in the house.

The police, who were also kept in ignorance of the real history of Con's disappearance, in the course of their investigations had gone to his cabin, and had made tenderest inquiries for him, expressing not only regret but keenest surprise at his non-presence there, and had been told by the old crone, Con's mother, that "the boy was away to Cork wid Mick Murphy."

This at first seemed a clue, but, unfortunately, from that moment both she and Murphy's people—as if by magic—altogether forgot the name of the street and house where Murphy had meant to put up, in Cork.

"Sarpints is fools to thim," said the sergeant (himself a "boy" from Donegal), as he went home in the evening discomfited. Perhaps had he known all that the Coole people knew at that moment about the missing Con, he might have applied that speech to them as well.

"But a promise is a promise," said Monica, and every one up there agreed with her. And so the days crept on, the frightened victims of the lying promises of the League leaders expecting from hour to hour a final visit from the police, brought about by the hidden man's treachery.

* * * * * * * *

It is night! Most of those who were at Coole on the occasion of the intended murder are just now sitting in nervous conclave in the house of Con's mother. It is long past midnight, and a sullen wind is roaring down the ravine, and casting small fragments of frozen snow against the solitary window-pane of the cabin. It is an evil night, wild with rain and storm, starless, and without glimpse of moon. As the wind falls, ever and anon can be heard the low shiver of the dripping leaves, like plaintive dirges from some shadowy land. Muttering of banshees, the women draw closer to each other by the dull turf fire; and

the men, crossing themselves, brood gloomily upon what the morrow may bring them.

"The night is dark and still: a heavier gloom ne'er covered earth.
In lowering clouds the stars are muffled deep."

A universal depression has fallen upon the watchers within: for many minutes no word has escaped their lips.

"'Tis time we were goin' home, boys," says an elderly man, at last, in a low tone. But no one answers him, and, the wind sinking at this moment to a transitory rest, a slight—an almost imperceptible—sound without, strikes upon their ears. Is it the police?

In an instant all within the cabin is changed: the figures hitherto inert and desponding now spring into active life. Not a syllable is spoken, but all keep their eyes upon the door, and two or three thrust their hands into their bosoms. Some one, taking the solitary candle, places it in an angle behind the dresser, where its light is of no use save to throw shadow upon the faces of those near it.

The sound again! So close now, and so distinct, as to leave no doubt about its being an approaching footstep. One woman—she is young, with a little child at her breast—makes a frantic movement towards one of the men, but is pressed back into the chimney-corner by the other women, and stands there silent indeed, but with wild eyes, and arms that seem as though, in the intensity of their embrace, they would crush the child they hold.

Nearer, nearer comes the step, and languidly, as though caution compels the sloth of it.

"We're caught, like rats in a trap!" hisses the old man who had spoken once before. "There's no chance for us, boys: so slip the lead into them, an' fight yer way out, if it comes to the worst. He's betrayed us, sure enough."

Another terrible pause, and then—

"Mother, are ye awake? Let me in, I tell ye," comes a voice from outside. Con's voice!

Silence follows. No one stirs, and then the girl in the corner, still with her baby clasped to her breast, starts forward. So does an old woman, brown and withered.

"'Tis himself," says the girl. "Mother, ye heard him! Open, an' let him in this piercin' night."

"Stand back, asthore," whispers the old woman, in an agony of fear, flinging her arms round the girl. "'Tis niver him; 'tis his spirit, I tell ye! I dreamt of him these three nights runnin', and each time he came home to me like this. Och! the fine boy he was! Oh! wirra, wirra, wirra!"

"Whist yer talkin'!" says the girl, angrily, pressing past

her: "hark! he's callin' ye again. Bat, Hurley, why don't ye let him in?"

"You shan't let him in aither," says Hurley, pushing her to one side. "He's there, sure enough; I know his voice. But who's behind him? Tell me that."

"Mother, mother!" comes the voice from outside again. "Who are ye talkin' wid? 'Tis freezing out here, an' 'tis on'y me, Con! Why don't ye spake to me, an' open the door?"

"I'm here too, Con avick, yer sisther Norah," cries the girl, suddenly, in a loud voice. "Swear be the Vargin ye're alone, an' we'll open to ye."

"I swear it," says Con. "Let me in, Norah: I'm half dead as it is."

Evading Hurley, Norah springs forward and draws the bolt of the door. A tall, gaunt figure, entering quickly, closes it again behind him, and looks curiously around.

"Oh, Con! asthore machree! Oh! darlin'!" cries his sister, bursting into tears, and flinging her arms round him. "Ye've come back to us! Oh, mother! 'tis himself! Oh, the blessed saints be thanked!"

"Take care of me arm," says Con, shrinking nervously; but he clasps her to him with his good arm right heartily nevertheless, and looks eagerly around.

Then all the women fall upon him at once; and his mother, kneeling, kisses his very feet in the extravagance of joy that is common to the Irish peasant. Some of the men are equally cordial with their welcome, but some of them still hold aloof.

"Where were ye all this dhreadful time, dear?" asks Norah, who has relinquished the baby now to her husband in the background, and is hanging over her recovered brother with eager excited affection.

"At Coole," says Con, in a low voice.

At this there is an evident sensation among the men. It cannot be true that he has gained freedom without offering a price for it. In what character has he returned to them? —as their trusty brother still? or as a spy and informer?

As if with one consent, they draw nearer and cluster round him, subdued hostility in their glances. His sister, quick to see all this, turns to Con.

"Tell us all about it," she says, hurriedly. "'Tis half kilt we are wid the suspense about ye, from day to day."

Whereupon Con, facing them all, gives an impassioned description of the kindly treatment he has received from those he would have injured.

"When ye all forsook me, lavin' me for dead upon the cowld and frosty ground, *they* took me in," he says, at last. "They warmed an' fed me, an' got the docther for me, an'

tended me as if I was their own flesh an' blood, an' not the ould man's murdherer, as I was in thought. May God forgive me for it! Even the ladies—Mrs. Desmond herself, an' Miss Kit, an' Lady Clontarf—would come at times to see me an' ask me how I was the day. An' Miss Kit give me me medicine herself, twice, an'—an'—once—she—Mrs. Desmond—brushed the hair off me forehead wid her own hand an' called me 'poor Con!' Oh!"—throwing out his hands with a gesture of despair,—"I felt like a dog, a *devil*, then!"

He covers his face, and all the women begin to cry softly.

"May the heavens be her bed!" says his mother, devoutly, looking up at the rafters.

"They minded me night an' day," goes on Con, with increasing vehemence. "And that, though they were in sore distress themselves, an' wid no help to spare for any one, an' not a soul to do them a hand's turn save Bridget an' ould Brady, as ye all well know," looking fiercely round upon them. "I tell ye now, honestly, I'm sick of this work. I'm goin' to America. Misther Brian's sendin' me. There's no good me stayin' here among your lot; for if I lived amongst ye for a thousand year to come, an' ye all talked to me till yer throats were dhry, I'd niver agin raise me hand ag'in' a Desmond. If I was his own son, the ould man couldn't have been kinder to me."

Here he falls to sobbing. Whereupon the women, nothing loath, chime in again and bear him company.

The men are silent, but still plainly suspicious,—that allusion to his intended emigration having roused their fears anew.

"Con agra," says an old man with a small cunning face, creeping softly up to him, "was ye ast no questions all the time ye lay on yer back above? Think now, avick. No little word about the boys here,—eh?"

"Sorra wan," says Con.

"D'ye mane to tell us," says a tall bony man, with a terrible shock-head of red hair, edging his way to the front, "that they nursed ye as ye say, an' let ye come back here scot-free widout exactin' a price for yer liberty,—a price that would be the blood of yer comrades? Think twice, Con, me lad, before ye thry to bethray us. There's them as thried that game before you, an' where are they now?—*rotting!*"

It would be impossible to describe the amount of ferocity in the man's eyes as he says this.

"Keep off o' me," says Con, pushing him back. "What is it ye'd say? Is it 'informer' ye'd cast in me teeth? I tell ye there was nothing said to me above there but—but

—'I hope, Con, you will bear nothing for us in your heart for the future but love.' An' 'twas she herself that said it, —the misthress!—lookin' for all the world like an angel from heaven as the words passed her lips, an' wid her gown tucked up around her, an' she workin' here an' there wid niver a servant to help her, an' doin' what her purty hands were niver meant to do. Oh,"—with a passionate gesture, —"I wish I had niver been dhragged into thryin' to do her an injury."

"An' ye swear no question was ast ye of that night's work?" asks the old man again, regarding him keenly.

"I do! From the time they took me in, until the hour I left to-night, there was no mention made to me of the attack in which we were all concerned."

Here he sinks on to a stool, looking pale and exhausted.

"Give him a dhrop of whiskey; he looks wake," says the man with the baby,—his brother-in-law; after which silence again ensues. Then suddenly the old man, who is plainly an authority among them, brings his hand down upon the table with a smart bang.

"Fegs an' all, but The Desmond has behaved ra'al dacent in this case," he says, with vehemence. Again he bangs the table, and then, having replaced his pipe in his mouth, looks round upon the others.

"Ay! ay!" say all. They say a good deal more than this, but quite to the same purpose.

"We shouldn't be behindhand wid him wid the generosity," goes on the old leader.

"Thrue for ye, Mike."

"What d'ye say, then, to lettin' him have the servants back? They are willin' enough to go."

A derisive laugh greets this proposal.

"Ayeh! I think I see The Desmond listenin' to their story," says some one.

"Let them thry it, anyway," says the old man. And so it is arranged.

In the morning all the frightened servants come sneaking back to Coole in a body, and a deputation of two selected from among them is sent up to The Desmond, whilst the others stay below in the kitchen, catechising Mrs. Moloney, and shaking in their shoes.

In an hour the deputation returns,—looking crestfallen enough, but bringing good news. Yes, The Desmond has extended forgiveness to them all. They can return to their duties without delay, but he begs them fully to understand that for the future they are servants, not friends, and that he declines again to repose any trust in them whatsoever.

So ends the Coole Boycotting.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

"He pourtrayed in his heart and in his thought
Her freshë beauty."

"WHAT long, long faces!" says Vera, entering the library at Coole, followed by Sir Watkyn, and looking round her with elevated brows.

Every one is here. But the principal figure is to be found at the central table, where Monica, harassed and all but in tears, is sitting, pen in hand, with Dicky Browne beside her. At least it is presumably Dicky Browne, from his boots and trousers, but the upper part of him is in doubt, or at least lost in the humid folds of the *Irish Times*.

"I've got her at last," he says, triumphantly.

"Who?" asks Vera. She has caressed her sister, Kit, and Mrs. Desmond, with ineffable grace and sweetness, and is now standing on tiptoe to see (over the paper) Mr. Browne.

"The nurse," says that young gentleman, gravely.

"We are in such trouble," explains Kit, plaintively. "Baby's nurse says she is quite afraid to stay with us any longer, and is leaving next week. She says, too, she has got the 'shakes' ever since that horrid night, when they attacked us; but *I* think she has got the big policeman, who has been here incessantly for the past five days. At all events, she is going, and we don't know how to get another nurse."

"You see, she understood baby so well," says baby's mother, her soft eyes drowned in tears. "I don't know what is to become of him when she leaves."

"I do," says Mr. Browne, with considerable force, waving his paper. "Just listen to this: 'A good respectable woman, with excellent references' (I like the word 'good:' don't you?) 'desires to go as nurse, to one child aged eighteen or twenty.' Oh, by Jove!"—rather taken aback,—"that must be wrong, though, or else she is on the lookout for an imbecile. I shouldn't think a child of eighteen or twenty would *be* a child. They didn't consider me in that light when I was eighteen," says Mr. Browne, reflectively.

"That shows their dulness," says Brian.

"I hope you aren't going to be stupid, Dicky," says Mrs. Desmond, sternly, lifting her mournful eyes to his.

"I am not,—not at all," says Mr. Browne. "Shall I go on? There's lots more of them."

"Yes, go on,"—resignedly.

"'Elderly woman, unexceptionable character, accustomed to the charge of young children able to take care of an infant.' Bless my stars! what a wicked advertisement!" says Dicky, piously. "Fancy training the young idea to nurse and dandle its little brothers and sisters, whilst the wily old woman, saturated with Old Tom, dreamt away the sunny hours. Don't have anything to say to her, Mrs. Desmond, please. Just imagine poor baby being educated to nurse his little—— Oh, I beg pardon, I'm sure——"

Considerable confusion on every side, and a stony glare from Mrs. Desmond.

"By Jove! here's another," goes on Mr. Browne, totally undismayed. "'Young woman, aged forty, *covets* the sifting of her character. Is specially happy with children. Wages thirty-five pounds, all found.' What on earth is it they always find?" asks Mr. Browne, innocently, rallying with admirable courage from his late shock.

"That won't do," says Monica.

"Well, we'll try the next—h'm—h'm: 'Protestant single-handed nurse'—good gracious!"—breaking off distractedly,—"what can a one-armed woman want with a baby? What could she want with anything? I never saw such a paper as this in all my born days."

But this is too much for Mrs. Desmond. She rises to her feet.

"Brian, take Dicky away," she says, authoritatively; whereupon Mr. Browne, still protesting, is forcibly removed.

At this moment the door is opened to admit the marquis, who advances in his airiest fashion, and, having saluted all the ladies present, goes up to The Desmond and taps him playfully upon the chest.

"I didn't give you credit for it: I didn't, I give you my word," he says.

"For what?" asks the old Squire, opening his eyes.

"Oh, it was clever! very clever! charmingly deep! right down artful!" says Lord Dundeady, prodding him again with unspeakable enjoyment.

"But what, my dear marquis?" asks The Desmond, still all at sea.

"Ha! *still* carrying it out?" says the marquis, with an admiring chuckle. "Well, then, if you must have it in words, I mean letting that fellow go! You kept him here for a week, fed him on your bounty, tended him like a son, had him petted by the most beautiful women in the universe,"—with a glance and a courtly bow to all the ladies present,—"and when he was overcome with gratitude you

sent him back to his people, as though he were that remarkable dove of old with the olive branch in his mouth, to convert the other outlaws! 'Twas clever! deuced clever!"

"But——" begins The Desmond, hotly.

"No modesty, now!" says the marquis, gayly. "I can see how it was all done, and it *was* clever, marvellously clever! I admire you, Desmond, more than I can say. Such a delicate stroke! and so successful! You were right, too, to accept their services again,—those fellows of yours, I mean,—quite right. My policy and yours are quite the same. Moderation I preach,—always moderation; nothing tells better in the long run. There is a whole pile of sermons in that one little word alone."

"It strikes me as being rather a big word, dad," says Clontarf, laughing.

"Ha! yes. Syllables count, no doubt; good,—very good, quite so! But you must admit, my dear Donat, that it was a perfect master-stroke cosseting up an enemy as The Desmond did, and then letting him loose to tell the tale. Why, Machiavelli"—lightly pressing The Desmond's arm—"would be nowhere beside you. Accept my congratulations."

"If I deserved them," says The Desmond, eagerly. "But I——"

"Now,—now, really, you know, my dear friend, one can carry even an excellent virtue too far," says the marquis, reproachfully; and then he turns to Monica, full of life and sprightliness again.

"And where is my little godson?" he asks, with a benign smile. "May I see him?"

"Yes, indeed," says Monica, with even a benigner, "if you really mean it?"

"Assure yourself of that. I know few sights so perfect as a charming child in the arms of a still more charming mother."

The marquis being made of contradictions, it will surprise nobody to hear that he is passionately fond of children, and that children are passionately fond of him.

Now, when Monica's baby is produced, he adjusts his glass carefully in his best eye, and, going up to him, gazes at him with a most friendly smile.

"How d'ye do, Mr. Desmond," he says, with an air of good-fellowship the young man seems to appreciate. "I wonder if you ever think of your old god-dad,—eh? May I be permitted to shake hands with your highness?"

Baby is delighted. He crows triumphantly, kicks his nurse violently, and betrays every desire to get from her to the smiling gentleman who is regarding him with kindliest glances. Finally, possessing himself of the marquis's

finger, he clutches it tightly, and, under the mistaken impression that it is a biscuit, conveys it to his mouth.

"Dear little thing! so clever! always knows a sugar-stick when he sees it," says Mr. Browne, tenderly. Whereupon the marquis very properly snubs him into silence.

Indeed, nothing can exceed the beauty of Lord Dundeady's behavior. He strokes the little fellow's cheek (who, in truth, is lovely enough to provoke admiration in a baby-farmer), and even makes an attempt to address him in his own language, which attempt is a direct failure and is regarded by baby as such. In fact, it fills the intelligent child with the belief that his respected godparent is a wild Indian, which belief he resents loudly, until appeased by the marquis's return to his native English and the recollection of the joys to be derived from the ticking of a watch.

"Nurse, do let me have him for a little bit," says Doris, coming suddenly forward from the window, where she has been watching baby's manœuvres with smiling eyes for the past five minutes.

"Think of your arm, my lady."

"I can think of nothing but that pretty boy." She holds out her hands to baby, and baby holds out his to her, with a lusty crow; and finally she bears him off, a willing captive, to her old seat in the window.

Here young Mr. Desmond proceeds to plant his feet upon her knees, preparatory to his great and final design of producing strangulation by means of his chubby arms; throwing them round her neck, he squeezes her with all his might; but Doris seems to like being strangled, and kisses her treacherous assailant after every fresh attempt, and is kissed back again warmly by the little Judas! There is a glow of honest delight in her large eyes, a soft flush upon her cheeks. Presently, at some surpassingly funny joke of baby's, she breaks into laughter,—such merry, girlish, unrestrainable laughter as makes Clontarf turn suddenly to look at her.

Some of the others look too.

"Ah! to be a painter, if only for the next hour, to make that lovely picture immortal!" says the marquis, rapturously.

"Very pretty; very, very sweet," says Sir Watkyn, with a senile grin, that he fondly believes to be a tender smile.

"What an ass that old person does make of himself!" says Brian Desmond, regarding him disdainfully. "He is trying to look as if he were the father of a family."

"My dear Brian, do have some respect for *our* feelings," says Mr. Browne, reprovingly, "if you have none for your own. There are certain remarks that should not be made

at the very top of one's lungs. See, our dear Sir Watkyn almost heard you; he is looking in our direction: what an excellent thing it is to be old and hopelessly deaf! But I pray you to be more careful in the future, and 'call not to his aged cheek the little blood that should keep warm his heart.'"

"I seldom saw a face so alive with honest sentiment," says Gerald Burke, looking at the shaky old baronet with an unmistakable sneer.

"Yes, *isn't* his expression wonderfully sweet and kind?" say Vera, slowly glancing up from her low chair straight into Burke's eyes. "I quite agree with you about him." Then her eyes wander away to where the old man is mumbling some inane story to The Desmond (who looks puzzled, but courteous), and she smiles prettily to herself, and taps the back of one little "lily-white" hand with the palm of the other in an artless, inconsequent fashion.

And still Doris and the baby laugh in concert, and still Clontarf watches them. Something in her happy mirth, her position with the little one upon her knee, her evident enjoyment of him, touches him strangely.

"Poor girl, she bought her title dear," he says to himself: "she would have been happier with love of husband and of child than with the barren honor she gained through me. How contented she looks now! how free of care, for the moment! Perhaps, had we met differently, she might have learned to love me; but now——"

He shifts his position abruptly, and stands so that his eyes can no longer rest upon her.

Shortly after this the marquis takes his leave, and a kiss from both Monica's baby and his fair daughter-in-law,—Clontarf strolling idly down-stairs with him to his carriage. The marquis tells the coachman to go on slowly to the entrance-gate, as he intends to walk so far with his son.

When they have gone fifty yards or so in silence, Dundeady turns suddenly and lays his hand affectionately upon Donat's arm.

"Well, and when am I to expect the grandson, Donat,—eh?" he says, gayly. "Really, you know,"—giving a little pull to his collar, and assuming a remarkably juvenile air,—"nobody will have as much reason to be astonished at anything as I shall when I find myself a grandfather."

A curious smile crosses Clontarf's face.

"Except me," he says, "when I find myself a father."

"Nothing surprising in *that;* quite a common occurrence,—as common as death, both to the peasant and the peer. When your poor dear mother (never could bring myself to replace her, my dear Donat) presented me with

you, I was never less surprised in my life. It really seemed to me that I quite expected it."

"Well, I suppose you did,"—dryly.

"Eh? oh! ah! just so," says the marquis, taking a pinch of snuff very delicately between his jewelled fingers. "Babies, as I have just said, are not confined to any particular class. All may luxuriate in them. They are the charming link that unites us with our poorer brethren and makes us believe ourselves all one happy family. No inequality *there*. No one law for the rich and another for the poor. It is a delightful arrangement, that creates kindly feelings between the classes, and—er—yes, quite so, you know, my dear Donat."

Here he steps into his carriage, and is driven away.

"What an amount of trash he does talk in the twenty-four hours!" says Donat, staring after him. "And yet I hardly know a nicer old fellow, when all is said."

CHAPTER XXIX.

"Thou shalt not love my ladye Emily,
But I will love her only and no mo'."

"This world is but a throughfare full of woe,
And we be pilgrims, passing to and fro:
Death is an end of every worldly sore."

FEBRUARY, dull and cold, has fallen behind, as time, with his mighty stride, hurries ever onward. And now that month

"In which the world began,
That brightë March, when God first maked man,
Is cómplete, and y-passed is also,"

and April, mother of leaf and bud, has fainted softly into the arms of her greater sister, and now that fairest May—that queen of months—is holding sway o'er land and sea and sky.

The young grasses that awhile agone were lying shivering and frightened by cold winter's blasts upon the sheltering bosom of their mother earth are all now up and doing, standing strong and straight and luscious, and tall enough, even in their tender youth, to make pretty waves of motion on the lawns and winding slopes, as the light wind rushes above their heads.

The spirit of life and joy and freshness is abroad. The birds, "with voice of angels in their harmony," are singing on every branch. The streams rush with a weird

musical chant over their shining pebbles. The great horse-chestnuts stand silent, opening their pale resinous buds to the glorious sun. "The ground is green, y-powdered with daisy," and starry tufts of primroses and swaying bells of deepest blue lend perfume to the air.

"Our dance is to be on Thursday," says Kit, dreamily, "and Madam O'Connor's afternoon on the Monday after, and then town. But why can't we do something before Thursday? this is only Tuesday, and *such* a day!"

"Do you want to do something now,—to-day?" asks Monica.

"Yes, this moment," sitting upright with unexpected energy, and staring hopefully at her sister. "Now, before the longing dies from me. Oh to be on the sea, this blissful summer day, with the sky above, and the rippling waves beneath, and the lazy flapping of the sails, and the cries of the snowy gulls, and——"

"Poor thing! she is rather worse to-day," says Mr. Browne, with deepest compassion, sitting up too, to examine Kit with growing regret. "So young,—so fair,—so very, *very* mad." After a prolonged survey of her disdainful countenance, he sinks back once more upon the sultry sward.

"I wonder what you keep a yacht for, Brian?" asks Kit, presently. "Is it for the coast-guards and the sailors to admire?"

"Well, let us go for a sail, if you like," says Brian, who is not proof against this withering sarcasm. "By Jove!"—growing animated,—"I think it would be nice, and Daly has the boat as fit as a fiddle. Come on, mouse,"—to his wife,—"let us drive to Milkcove" (a little coast-guard station about two miles away, where "The Cloud" is lying) "and get on board and sail for isles unknown."

"No, for the caves," says Kit. "What a delicious thought! Yes, do let us go there; I don't believe Dicky ever saw Poulnadhav."

"N—o, I dare say not. Certainly I never tasted it," says Mr. Browne.

"Why, it's a cave, you silly boy," says Miss Beresford. "Neil, tell him about it." (Mr. Brabazon, as well as Mr. Browne, dropped down upon Coole yesterday to be in time for Monica's ball.) "How could you taste it?"

"I don't see that he will have anything else to taste," says Monica, gloomily, who appears lost in dismal reflections. "You want to get up an impromptu picnic, but I never yet heard of one that wasn't an outrageous failure. I don't believe there is anything in the house fit to eat."

"There must be whatever is meant for luncheon," said Kit.

"Luncheon!—yes. But if you go out like that" (the exact meaning of "that" is not gone into) "you will want both luncheon and dinner. I know what sea-air means, and the awful results of hunger on those who go yachting with nothing to eat."

"So do I," says Dicky, with deep sympathy. "It always means the eating of the juiciest person on board. I don't believe in the drawing lots business a bit. I'm positive it is all managed beforehand among the lean ones."

"It means ill temper only," says Monica, indignantly. "Why can't we put it off until——?"

"Never," says Kit, rising with stern determination to her feet. "Cook can put us up dinner and breakfast and luncheon and afternoon tea, and supper if we require it, without a moment's thought. *I* know her. I'll speak to her. You leave her to me, Monica."

"Oh, so gladly," says Mrs. Desmond, with a sigh of unmistakable relief. "Go on, and prosper."

"Brian," says Kit, quite giving herself the air of a major-domo, "you just send a man on horseback to Milkcove, to tell your men there to have 'The Cloud' ready in an hour, and, Neil, will you go up to Kilmalooda and get all the people there to come with us?"

"Yes, that will be charming," says Monica, now at last entering into the spirit of the thing. "Gerald Burke is staying there, and that queer old gal—gal——"

"Do you mean Mrs. Costello?" asks Mr. Browne, suavely.

"No," says Monica, with dignity. "I was thinking of Sir Watkyn, and I was going to say he was a galvanic battery in himself."

"You really ought to be more explicit," says Mr. Browne, mournfully. "Not even Sir Watkyn himself could convey to me a greater shock than the thought that I might have to spend my afternoon with that good but uncertain old woman Mrs. Costello."

"How ungrateful you are, Dicky," says Miss Beresford, moving away towards cook, "when you know how Mrs. Costello adores you. I am certain when she is dead your name alone will be found graven on her heart,—like that poor Mary and her Calais."

"You assign me too high a place in her esteem," says Mr. Browne, with humility. "I think the honor you mention is reserved for my lord the marquis."

* * * * * * * * *

Upon the never-slumbering sea the pretty "Cloud" is dancing like the reflection of its namesake overhead, now gliding gracefully with slow but sure motion through the green waters, now darting swiftly onwards as she is caught by a passing breeze, now lagging as though full of pretty

petulance as the wind dies away, and only the lazy flapping of her canvas can be heard.

All our friends are on board her, and all are in their very happiest moods. It is indeed a day so charming that it is impossible for any one but to be in unison with it.

They have skimmed past the rocks on their left hand, and have visited one or two of the really beautiful caves that may be found on the southern coast of Ireland; they have flown out towards the horizon, as though in haste to catch it and solve its mysteries and learn about the land behind it, so real to childish hearts; they have gone, indeed, so far on this mission that the rocks, left far behind them, lose their identity and shine like silvery mists under the rays of the setting sun.

They have dined, and laughed, and made merry, as only those can to whom youth is still in the present. Sir Watkyn alone (who *would* come with them) has fallen short of the gay mark assigned them, and yet he (to carry out my argument), in virtue of his having entered on his second childhood and being therefore the youngest on board, should have been the gayest of the gay.

He is not, however: a "green and yellow melancholy" is feeding on his (anything but damask) cheek, and he has shown signs of depression not to be mistaken. There was even a moment when the words "ground-swell" were ejected from his lips, as though in a spasm of agony, and there were other moments when he was speechless; and during the past half-hour (even though they are now slowly sailing inland again) there are *many* moments when he has betrayed such a disposition to sink into the collars of his innumerable coats as to become, so far as his head goes, almost invisible. When he has achieved this last manœuvre three times, he attracts to him the breathless attention of Mr. Browne: there are perhaps occasions when the kindly scrutiny of Mr. Browne is not altogether desirable.

"How on earth does he do it?" asks that worthy of Mrs. Desmond, when Sir Watkyn has shrunk almost out of sight for the third time. "It's awfully clever, isn't it?—watch him."

"Poor old thing! I'm afraid he isn't feeling very comfortable," says Monica, compassionately. "See how he nestles into his coat."

"If he nestles much farther he will be soon out of sight: that's the third time he has done it. But the fearful part of it is," says Mr. Browne, with growing concern, "that, though he goes down at the collar, he never comes out at the boots: it's true, for I've carefully kept my eyes on 'em, and he ought to, oughtn't he? He can't shut himself up

like a telescope, can he? There! Look! he is going to do it again. Now keep your eye on him: don't take it off his socks for a moment. As his neck declines his legs should show, and—no! *not a sign of them.* Now, who can explain this mystery? Perhaps," solemnly, "he has no socks, no legs, nothing; maybe he is a dear little fairy."

"Fairies have legs," says Kit.

"Have they?"—innocently. "I can't say, not ever having seen one: you have?"

"Well, a pretty sort of fairy *he* would be, at all events," says Kit, declining to answer the question, and glancing at the very sick Sir Watkyn with contempt.

"Would he? Now, really, I'm sorry I can't agree with you there," says Mr. Browne, apologetically, as though overwhelmed with grief at having to differ with her in opinion. "Just look at the little bit you can see of him, and reconsider the question."

Here Vera's voice comes to them, sweet and fresh, from the other side of the yacht, addressed to Brian.

"See that little pathway up the cliffs yonder," she says. They have now come quite close to the shore again, but still Sir Watkyn looks unpleasant. "Could we not land, some of us, and see where it leads to? There should be a glorious view from the top."

"Oh, yes, I am sure of it," says Sir Watkyn, with a groan.

"Well, we can try it," says Brian, good-naturedly: "we can get as close as possible, and then the boat can land as many of us as wish for finer scenery than we now have."

Nobody else says anything, but a few look in wonder at Vera, whose frequently-declared hatred of walking in any shape or form is distinctly remembered by all. How sweet of her to try and help that wretched old man to the longed-for *terra firma!* how odd of her to come to his help when no one else does! Opinion about her motive for so doing is divided.

There is one person, however, whose opinion about it is formed, and adversely. With a stern and openly resentful brow Gerald Burke turns to look at the pretty fairy-like little creature who has just lisped her request to Desmond.

In the earlier part of the day, when they had all first come on board, Vera had devoted herself to her young lover,—had sat by him,—very close to him,—had smiled into his eyes and given the lookers-on to understand that her nearness to Burke caused her sweet content. To Burke himself this thought has been satisfying almost to the verge of intoxication: to feel the girlish form nestling close to him, to look with ill-concealed rapture into the ex-

quisite, childish, frankly-uplifted face has transformed for him the prosaic earth into an achieved heaven.

And then suddenly there had come a little break in their happy *tête-à-tête.* Some one—Brian, or Clontarf, or some one, what does it matter?—had come up to them, and entered into a conversation that had drawn Gerald's exclusive attention from Vera.

It seemed but a little instant it had been thus withdrawn, yet when he turned to her again, lo! she was gone. She had, as it were, insensibly melted away from his side, to reappear again a little later by the side of Sir Watkyn.

See how she smiles at him now,—how she chatters in that soft, youthful, inconsequent fashion that belongs to her. She is surely as happy with him—*him*—as she was with Gerald a small hour ago! All this past wretched sixty minutes he has watched her, has marked her brightness, then her soft sympathy with the ghastly old man, then her effort to help him to the joys of solid ground once more. Minute by minute he has followed her every look and tone, until this culminating request of hers—that has Sir Watkyn's welfare so fairly in the foreground—lashes the jealousy of his peculiarly excitable nature to a pitch little short of madness.

And now "The Cloud" has come as close to the treacherous rocks as prudence and her sailing-master will permit, and the small boat has been lowered and stands ready awaiting passengers for the shore.

At the very last moment, however, it is discovered that two alone desire to avail themselves of it. These are Vera and Sir Watkyn. They alone show a Spartan determination to "climb the (yonder) hill together," or die!

Sir Watkyn, looking as unlike "John Anderson, my jo," as anything you can conceive, is already in the row-boat, so great is his haste to touch mother earth again. He is now gazing as eagerly upwards in search of Vera as his dulled sight will permit, in the hope of hurrying her as she stands by the gangway.

"You can stay ashore for a bit. We'll cruise about, and be back for you by and by," calls out Brian to him, in a kindly spirit, knowing the wretched old man will be glad of a respite.

"Very good!" says Vera, answering for him with a gay soft laugh: "we shan't miss you. But be sure you don't forget us altogether, or you will find only our two frozen corpses in the morning."

She laughs again lightly and steps forward. Burke (who has come deliberately up to her as though to help her to descend the ladder into the boat below) is now the only one quite close to her, except Lady Clontarf, who is

stretched in happy indolence upon some cushions rather near.

"Now!" says Vera, smiling and extending her hand to Burke, as though to accept his aid. As she meets his eyes, however, the smile fades in a degree.

"You will not go with him alone?" he says, in a low, hurried voice, his face set and stern.

"Alone? But why not, then?" says Vera, with a recovered smile as fresh as its predecessor, and with merrily uplifted brows.

"For many reasons. For one great reason. Vera, consider: it is throwing me aside."

"Hm?" says Vera, questioningly.

"Ask Kit—ask me—ask *any one* to accompany you," says Burke, his nostrils dilating.

"Nonsense! What little fad have you got into your head now, you silly boy?"

"You mean to go, then?"

"Certainly I mean it. Give me your hand: I am afraid to go down by myself."

"You shall not go," says Burke, suddenly, laying his hand upon her arm. To the careless on-lookers, this action simply conveys the idea that he is extravagantly anxious about her safe descent. Vera's fair unmoved face, sweet as an angel's, would have made this thought a certainty even had there been any doubt about it.

"Shall not! Fie! What an ugly word!" she says, with a little saucy childish grimace.

"You persist, then?" says the young man, in a dangerously low tone. His face is gray with uncontrollable passion; there is a light in his dark eyes that should have warned her,—that *must* have warned a cleverer woman, or one possessed of greater soul. Doris, who has seen his expression, half rises from her seat, but then sinks back again, dreading to interfere, and indeed not knowing if interference will be wise, as not a word has reached her ears.

"You are keeping me," says little Vera, with pretty petulance. "See, Sir Watkyn grows impatient."

She leans over the side and smiles archly at Sir Watkyn. Such a little delicate dainty figure is thus reflected in the waters beneath that even the "stupid fish" stand still below, afraid to destroy so beautiful an image by swimming over it.

"You are going willingly to him! You deliberately reject me! You fling me from you!" says Burke, in a low but terrible voice.

"I am afraid I must, if you will not let me pass," laughs she, still scornfully regardless of danger, "strong as you are."

"I am strong enough at least for one thing," returns he, in a tone curiously still. "If you will not be mine in life, you shall at least be mine in death!"

As though at last—too late—frightened by something in his face, she moves backwards: she slips,—then his arms are round her,—there is a faint struggle, then a splash, a cry, a parting of the clear waters, and an awful silence.

It is followed by a piercing scream from Doris that rings through the air and chills the blood of the hearers. Every one rushes to the edge of the vessel, and two seamen fling themselves into the water. There is a pause full of agony, and then Vera is drawn to the surface of the water by one of the men, the other having hold of Burke, who is insensible.

"I shouldn't 'a' thought Misther Burke would be so hard to tackle in the wather," says his rescuer, as he lands him safely in the boat. "But he lost his head altogether. He kept a tight hold o' the young lady, till I thought he meant really to dhrownd her outright."

Whatever he meant, as he recovers from his senseless condition (which is in a minute or two) he exhibits the most terrible grief and remorse as his gaze falls upon the pale, limp, senseless figure of Vera, now lying on the deck, with Lady Clontarf and the others bending over it.

"Ah! she breathes! she breathes!" says Doris, suddenly; and then the poor little thing's eyes unclose, and consciousness returns.

"Doris," she says, faintly.

"Darling, yes. I am here," says Lady Clontarf, who has her sister's head on her knees. "It was terrible, but you are safe now." Then, seeing some anxiety in Vera's pale face, and anticipating some sad confidence. "You want to say something," she says. "You have something to——"

"Fling your lace scarf over my head," whispers Vera, with difficulty, "and then take me below. Wet hair is so unbecoming!"

So the pretty silky curly locks are decently covered, and she is carried below and put regularly to bed.

That it has been anything more than a most unfortunate accident has not occurred to any one. Even Doris, though a little frightened by the anger on Gerald's face a while ago, honestly believes now that the mishap was caused by a false step backwards on the part of Vera and an effort at rescue unsuccessfully attempted by Burke. And Vera, when she is warm and dry again, and has been compelled to swallow some brandy, says little or nothing about the affair likely to throw light on it. Gerald has been equally silent, and, beyond a passionate request to be allowed to see and speak with Vera, lets no words pass his lips.

"Can't he see her, poor old chap?" says Clontarf to Doris when Vera is lying with recovered color in her tiny berth. "He is so distressed about this unlucky affair that it would be a positive mercy to let him behold her once again in a dry and living state."

"I'll ask her if she will see him," says Lady Clontarf.

"And you will, won't you, darling?" she says, bending over her sister a minute later.

"Oh, I can't!" says Vera, with a shudder.

"But why, dearest? The accident was not his fault, you know."

"Oh, no,—of course not."

"Then do see him. He is very, very unhappy. So—so—Donat tells me."

"Is he?" She laughs a little. "*Why*, I wonder? Is he disappointed?"

"Oh, more than that. He is naturally very distressed that your day should have turned out such a failure."

"The failure is his," says Vera, with the same curious amusement in her tone. Then, quickly, "I did slip,—I know that,—but when he caught me, why did he draw me forwards instead of backwards, and why did he hold me so when the waters closed over us?"

"Vera, what are you thinking?" says Doris, recoiling from her.

"Nothing. It is nonsense, I dare say. And he only meant to save me. So my deliverer (shall we call him that?) wants to see me? Tell him no!—no! that I don't want to see any one."

"You have some strange anger in your heart towards him. Yet he is miserable about you. Surely his love cannot anger you?"

"No. I am not angry with him about that."

"About what, then?"

"Well, let us say because he has put my hair out of curl,"—with a provoking smile. "No man with any heart could have done me such an injury. Indeed, you must not ask me to see any one, Dody, now when I am looking so ugly."

"You could never look that." Coaxingly,—"See, your hair is almost dry again, and quite lovely. Now, darling, you will be kind to him?"

"*You* are very tender to him," says Vera, with a sudden flash.

"I pity him from my soul," says Lady Clontarf, with a quick sigh. "He loves,—and he is miserable!"

"So he ought to be,"—pettishly. "Even if my words of a moment since cruelly wronged him, still but for him I should now be dry and able to amuse myself. And if he

does love as you suppose, why, then misery should be far from him, according to your own theory revealed to me a long while ago. Do you remember it? You used to regret your own inability to fall in love, and tell me you believed the very fact of being able to lose one's self in an affection for another should be sufficient for the earthly happiness of any one."

"True. 'Out of my own mouth you condemn me,'" says Doris, with a faint smile. "But," growing very pale, "one says many foolish things in one's time, and—it was, as you say, a *long while ago.* I have now in my later years thought it all over again, and it seems to me that love unrequited is 'sharper than a serpent's tooth.'"

"Like the ingratitude of a child," says Vera, flippantly. "But you, Dody, what should you know of love unrequited?—you who have never loved?"

A great wave of color sweeps over Doris's face: she lifts her head as if to make some careless reply, but her lips refuse to obey her. Tears rise to her eyes. She grows crimson,—a *shamed* crimson,—and with a sad little effort to conceal it she turns away as if to hide her confusion.

"Doris! Doris!" cries Vera, sharply. She catches her sister's hand, and, drawing it to her lips, kisses it with such feverish fervency that the caress leaves a pink mark upon the fair white flesh. The girl's whole face changes, the inexplicable rush of almost violent emotion that crosses it driving out of remembrance (for the moment) the careless, soulless, mischievously childish expression that usually characterizes it. This glimpse of soul Doris alone has had it in her power to conjure up on one or two very rare occasions.

"I have hurt you, but I don't know how," says Vera, with keenest contrition. "*Look* at me! I promise to do whatever you wish. I will even see him, and I will be kind to him,—kinder than you know,—if you will only forgive me."

"There is nothing to forgive," says Doris, calmly. "But I shall be glad if you will try to assuage poor Gerald's grief."

"Bring him to me," says Vera, throwing her arms round her sister's neck with a most unusual betrayal of feeling. "I will do anything for you."

He comes!

He falls upon his knees beside her, his mad passion now quelled, and deadly remorse reigning in its stead. He does not attempt to touch the small hand lying outside the coverlet like a pale snow-flake. As though *afraid* to look at her, he bends forward and bows his head upon his arms.

"My soul," he says at last, in a stifled voice, "to be *forgiven* by you,—that I know is not possible for me: I only

wanted to see you,—to hear your voice again,—to know you had not passed away from me, I still living!"

Mindful of her promise to the one thing dear to her in her life (*fatal* promise!), to be kind to him, Vera stretches the outlying hand a little farther until it rests on his.

"I do forgive you," she says.

He bursts into tears, silent but terrible, and, clasping the little hand, presses it between his own as though with its touch salvation has come to him. Speech is to him impossible, and for a long time a strange stillness falls upon the tumultuous heart beating so wildly in the tiny half-lit cabin.

"I think you might say you are sorry," says Vera, at last, oppressed by this violent calm.

"I cannot."

"You cannot?"

"No," rejoins he, fiercely, lifting his haggard face at last. "I am sorry for one thing only,—that my plan failed. I wish with all my soul we two were lying now dead and cold under those merry blue waves out there."

"Oh, no! no!" says Vera, shrinking from him. "Do not talk so horribly. No sun, no light, no flowers, only darkness and cold, *forever!*"

She shivers violently, and with a sudden movement he takes her in his arms.

"You are my light and my sun," he says, with passionate fondness. "I live but for you. I cannot—I *will* not see you live without me. But we shall live together. Is it not so, beloved? Oh, Vera, my life's life! tell me you will not forsake me."

"You seem very determined that I shan't," says Vera, with a bewitching smile. "And now, one little word: *keep* our secret a secret. Say nothing to anybody of this day's work. Don't make confessions to inquisitive friends, because your 'heart is full,' or for any other absurd reason. Remember, it was a *mere accident*, as—" here she looks at him intently, and a puzzled expression grows within her eyes, "as perhaps it was."

"I shall remember," says the young man, slowly. He neither refutes nor acknowledges the truth of her insinuation.

"Now go," says Vera, gently.

Without another word he departs, and so quietly that Doris, who is standing in the saloon beyond, with her palms religiously pressed against her ears, lest she should by chance overhear a word that is passing within, is unaware of his departure. She is unaware, too, of Clontarf's approach from the other side, until he lays his hand upon her shoulder.

"What on earth are you doing?" demands he, naturally much surprised at her attitude.

"Trying not to hear," returns she, speaking low.

"Hear what?"

"What Vera may be saying to Gerald, or he to her."

"Well, you may save yourself any further pains in your arms," says Clontarf, "because *I* am listening with all my might, and I can't hear anything."

"Perhaps they are whispering," says Doris, preparing to listen herself.

"Perhaps so," says Clontarf. Doris has now approached the door leading into the cabin where Vera lies, and is bending forward in an anxious attitude; Clontarf, following her, bends forward also, and tries to look as anxious as she does, as hard as ever he can. This naturally brings their heads very close together.

"I can't hear a sound," says Doris, in a subdued undertone.

"Nor I," in a tragic whisper. Here, the yacht lurching somewhat to the right, Doris staggers a little to the left,—that is, to Clontarf, who instantly places his arm round her, and brings her to anchor so.

"Very unsteady at times, isn't it?" he says, with quite an absent air.

"Very," says Doris, with her eyes immovably fixed upon the keyhole of the door before her.

"It is sure to be unsteady again in a minute or two," says Clontarf.

"I shouldn't wonder," says Doris.

"At that rate, I think we had better stay as we are: don't you?" suggests Clontarf. "You—you don't mind much, do you?"

"N—ot much," says Doris. Another lengthened pause.

"Dear me, I wish one of them would say something," whispers Doris, at last, rather nervously. "This silence is very strange."

"You think she has forgiven him his awkwardness?"

"Oh, yes, I think so; I hope so. He loves her so dearly she should be able to forgive him anything."

"Does she love him?"

"I cannot be sure of that; but I think it would not be difficult to a woman to find him very dear. He is in many ways most lovable."

"Is it such a man that *you* could love?"

"No," she says, with a suddenness that surprises even herself, and sends a warm rush of color to her cheeks and brow. Then she grows pale, and stirs uneasily. "I think I had better go in and see how she is," she says, with some nervousness.

"Wait a moment; you may as well give them two minutes more; and, besides, there is something else I want to ask you: I——"

"No, I am anxious about her; I must go now," says Doris, breaking from him gently, but with determination, and entering Vera's room, to find her there—alone.

"Why, is not Gerald here?" she says, with quick surprise.

"No; he left me quite a quarter of an hour ago," says Vera, lazily.

CHAPTER XXX.

"Her mouth was sweet as bracket or as methe."

"To look on her him thought a merry life."

"For she was wild and young, and he was old."

ALREADY the fiddles are beginning to squeak, although none of the guests as yet have arrived, except the Kilmalooda party, who have dined at Coole, and are now roaming idly here and there through the rooms and galleries, which are all brilliantly lit. It is *the* Thursday night, the night of Monica's ball; and up and down the picture-gallery (undaunted by the dreadful frowns of grim cavaliers and the still more dreadful simpers of long-buried ladies) Brabazon and Kit are having a preliminary waltz before descending slowly and decorously to the ball-room.

In the library, Vera too is doing a little preliminary business, but in a manner far more staid. She has quite recovered the effects of her submersion, and is now sitting opposite Sir Watkyn (who is looking very many degrees more ghastly and shrivelled in his evening clothes, and is evidently in spirit hankering after the furred coats) in the daintiest costume Worth could produce, and the happiest mood.

Sir Watkyn, bending tenderly towards her, tries to infuse into his powdered and painted old face an expression of sentimental grief and regret, whilst the lovely guileless face opposite to him smiles encouragingly and entreats him to forget the unhappy accident that so nearly lost her to her friends two days ago.

"How did it happen?" asks Sir Watkyn, anxiously. "I was looking on, yet could see nothing to cause so terrible a catastrophe."

"My foot slipped," says Vera, lightly: "so silly of me,

wasn't it? But there are moments when I am the silliest thing alive."

"There is never a moment when you are not the loveliest thing alive," says Sir Watkyn, with an elaborate bow.

"No! no! no! you must not say pretty things like that to me," says Vera, with a smiling frown, and, unfurling her fan, she taps his withered cheek with childish coquetry. "You will turn my head. That is what Dody says."

"I wish I could turn your heart," says the old beau.

"What! *Away* from you!" a delicate incitement in her tone. "No! not another word. Such an unkind little speech cannot be condoned."

"You know I was far from meaning that."

"*To* you, then? Ah! hypocrite! That would be impossible, because—well, never mind the because!"

Her manner is a distinct admission that her heart has been already so turned. Sir Watkyn is in a seventh heaven of delight,—a very fool's Paradise, into which, however, the serpent of jealousy entering, mars in a degree his satisfaction.

"What was Burke saying to you just before you made that unfortunate movement?" he asks, referring again to the scene on board "The Cloud."

"I think," says Vera, with a charming downcast glance, that makes the absence of a blush sink into insignificance, "he was asking me not to go on that little expedition up the cliffs with—with—*you!* and—I was refusing to listen to his absurd demand."

("If I am anything," says Miss Costello to herself at this instant, "I am strictly truthful!") And so indeed she always is, when it does not interfere with her comfort so to be!

This last speech is, of course, cakes and ale to the elderly suitor. His ancient blood grows almost tepid as he tells himself this lovely, shy (?), embarrassed girl ignominiously refused, for his sake, to listen to the request of a man so much his junior.

"But you mustn't be conceited about all this," says Beauty, with a tremulous sauciness. "I only insisted on going with you because—because I wanted to see the perfect view from those hills. You understand?" She leans towards him, and the subtile perfume of violets that always seems to belong to her wafts from her to him. "You know it was only that?" she asks, with a slow smile that challenges a contradiction.

"No; I will *not* know that," says Sir Watkyn, growing bold. Never before has she given him such open encouragement.

"Well, know what you will," she says, with a little

youthful shrug of her soft rounded shoulders. "At all events, I wanted to go with you; and then came my false step, and then Gerald, springing forward to save me, got a bad—*bad*—wetting himself, poor fellow!"

"Lucky fellow, *I* think. I wish I could have been in his place," says Sir Watkyn, meaning to be gallant, and succeeding nobly in being unutterably foolish.

"I wish indeed you had been," says Vera, with the utmost sincerity. Again she speaks the exact truth. If Sir Watkyn had been her companion at that luckless moment, there would have been no passionate abandonment to despair, no *esclandre*, no spoiled gown, no curly hair hopelessly disarranged.

"But don't let us talk any more about it," says Vera, clapping her hands with childish vivacity. "It is a gruesome subject: let us forget it. Let us talk of something happy. You would *like* me to be happy, wouldn't you?"—rising and coming closer to him.

"What a question!" says Sir Watkyn, with extreme fervor, looking up with a faded smile at the dazzling fairy-like vision standing before him.

"Then promise me something," says the fairy, softly, coming nearer still.

"You have but to speak," says the old man.

"But it is a great, *great* favor I ask," says Vera, and then suddenly, with one of her wild graceful movements, she seats herself on the arm of his chair and lets one of her bare white arms fall across his shoulders. It *may* be only the careless action of a thoughtless child. It may—be something more.

"What is there I could refuse you? What need is there for you to doubt my reply?" says Sir Watkyn, amorously.

"Dance the first quadrille with me, then," whispers the siren, bending over him.

The pretty anxiety she betrays to obtain her simple desire would be flattering to any man. In the dilapidated specimen of manhood beside her it produces something akin to intoxication that displays itself in hysterical mirth.

"Oh! Eh! Ha, ha, ha!" cackles he, with foolish delight. "I—I really, you know—I—er—'pon my word, I never dance, you know. Against my principles,"—with an attempt at a feeble joke. Alas! what a poor attempt even at that!

"But you will with me," says Vera, fresh and fair, with childish persistence. "You can't refuse me when I ask you, can you? Do you know,"—confidentially,—"I have set my mind upon stirring you up a bit. Nerves and rheumatism are all nonsense until one is quite old! *You*

will grow 'quite old' before your time" (ye gods!) "if you let yourself dream away your life any longer. Come, I *ask* you to dance with me, and"—coaxingly—"I will tell you a secret: nobody ever says 'No' to me."

"I wonder if you would say 'no' to somebody?" asks Sir Watkyn, with a delightfully sportive air full of artful meaning.

"Of course not. I am not so cruel as you," says Vera, archly, shaking her head. Then she breaks into a fresh sweet laugh, and, bending over him, places one little delicate snowy finger on his painted old cheek, and turns his face towards her.

"Are you going to be cruel?" she asks.

"Alas! the cruelty lies with you," says the old fool. "I cannot forget there are others here, younger, handsomer, with whom you will prefer to dance."

"Not one," says Vera, promptly, nodding her little blonde head. "There may indeed be others here younger!" pursing up her rose-red lips and assuming an air of deprecation. "I didn't *think* of it, do you know, until you put it into my head, but I suppose you are right. No doubt there are others younger. However," with a sudden and bewildering relapse into her former restless gayety, "what has that to do with you and me? I want you to dance with me, and you will come?—is it not?" She slips her slender hand through his arm confidingly.

He rises to his feet. But still there is a lurking doubt within his eyes,—a last faint ray of sense.

"You don't really mean all this, now, do you? Eh! Eh?" he says, trying to smile, but succeeding very imperfectly.

"That I want to dance with you, to talk with you? *Don't* believe it, then, if you don't want to!" says Vera, with a lovely irresistible pout, drawing back from him.

"Ah!" says Sir Watkyn: he seizes her hand; the *dénoûment* she has worked for is all but hers, when outside—coming swiftly towards the library from the hall beyond—a step is distinctly heard. Instinct tells her it is Burke's.

"Some one is coming," she says, softly, smiling even now, whilst trying anxiously to release her hand.

"I have something to say to you," says Sir Watkyn, mumbling his words fatuitously. "By and by, perhaps,—after supper,—you will——"

"I shall be here," says Vera, in a low voice and quickly, yet so carefully as to conceal from him all idea of haste or confusion. And, when a moment later the door is opened, she is to be seen quite at the other side of the room from Sir Watkyn, indolently, half wearily, turning over the pages of the "Inferno" as illustrated by Doré.

"Ah! you, Gerald!" she says, calmly, looking into Burke's eyes without a qualm. Whereupon Sir Watkyn, who has now and then some last faint glimmerings of sense, hastily quits the room.

"Yes,"—advancing towards her with a lowering brow: "you did not expect me here, I dare say."

"Yes, I did," says Vera, with her most enchanting smile. "I knew," stretching out her arm and laying the very tips of her fingers gracefully upon his sleeve, "that wherever I was, there you would surely be—before long." Her voice sinks to a caressing whisper.

"Oh to be able to believe you!" cries Burke, passionately, half disarmed by her manner. He looks haggard and worn, and as a man might who is no stranger to weary, sleepless nights. There is, too, that curious gleam in his eyes she had noticed on board the yacht, and that warns her to conciliate him while she may. At all risks a second scene must be avoided.

"How handsome he is, but what an impracticable person!" she says to herself. "A delightful person to lead a forlorn hope or steer a lifeboat crew, but rather a trying one to sit at breakfast with for the term of one's natural life."

"Your tie is not quite straight," she says, aloud. "There,"—touching it,—"now it is all right." She comes even nearer and beams upon him, with a view to reducing him to reason once again.

"You will give me all the waltzes to-night?" says Gerald, eagerly, laying his hand upon her pretty white arm.

"All?"

"Yes,—all," a little imperiously.

"Why, yes," says Vera, softly. "Whom else should I give them to? With whom do I care to dance but you? I was"—tenderly—"so hoping you would ask me."

She smiles with a heavenly sweetness into his eyes as she says this.

"My life!—my darling!" says poor Burke, his voice vibrating with a terrible—because hopelessly sorrowful—passion. He falls on his knees before her, and presses his lips wildly to a fold of her soft clinging gown. There is a world of unuttered anguish, of cruel love and doubt and despair, and still more cruel hope, in the beautiful face he uplifts to hers,—a face sharpened by mental misery during these past few months and worn to a shadow of its former self,—a face that it would have saddened the heart of any true woman to behold.

"Vera, if it is all true, kiss me," he says.

"Not now,—not here," says Vera, laying her finger warningly upon her lips. "Hush! get up; there is some

one coming. Later on we shall see each other again. Ah!" as the door opens. "You, Sir Watkyn? Has the music commenced, then? Have you come to claim me? Punctuality, I confess, has its charms, though I am the least punctual person in the world myself." She lays her hand upon his arm with a radiant smile. Not even the faintest passing shadow of regret or agitation mars the sparkling beauty of her soft baby face.

CHAPTER XXXI.

"Alas! the woe! alas! the painës strong
That I for you have suffered, and so long!
* * * * * * * *
Farewell, my sweet, farewell, mine Emily."

It is long past midnight. The climax of the ball has been reached. Some people are perhaps enjoying themselves, some certainly are not.

Kit is openly, undisguisedly happy, and is dancing with her Neil rather more than etiquette permits even to lovers. She is looking radiantly pretty, and "as sweet," says an old Squire in a corner, "as new-mown hay." Lady Clontarf, too, is for once happy, without a drawback. She is in her brightest mood, and is now retailing to her father-in-law some mischievously amusing story, that is making the old marquis shake with suppressed mirth. She is so arch, so gay, so brilliantly beautiful, that Clontarf, watching her from afar with a frowning brow, declares to himself that he hardly knows her.

The frowning brow has arisen out of the fact that Colonel Bouverie is present again to-night, and again seemingly devoted to Doris. She has danced pretty often with him, has appeared in unusually high spirits when with him, and has treated him in a fashion that has seemed simply friendly to the many, but something much more to the eyes of an angry husband.

Vera is looking as fresh and innocently fair as if a certain conversation that has taken place in the library since supper had never been. Yet it *has* taken place, and has changed her life in the present, and irrevocably shaped it for the future.

Finding herself now next to Kit, who is sitting in an anteroom crowded with flowers, from which a view of the ball-room can be gained, she drops into a seat near her.

"Tired?" she asks.

"I dare say," says Kit; "but I haven't had time to think about it, I have been enjoying myself so. Have you?"

"I don't know when I have had such a lovely time."

"I never was so surprised," says Kit, "as when I saw Sir Watkyn dance with you. How did he ask you? Were you unable to get out of it?"

"I like dancing with him," says Vera, simply. "He is such a dear old thing, isn't he?"

"I think him quite a horrid old thing," says Kit, frankly.

"*Do* you? *Really*, I mean? Do you know," with a glance of regret, "I doubt my own judgment isn't altogether sound on some points. To me Sir Watkyn appears quite an old pet; and yet you——what was it you said?"

"It hardly matters what I said," says Kit, with a little contemptuous shrug. "Think for yourself. Use your eyes. Look at his grimaces, his affectations, his eyes, his legs."

In spite of that conversation in the library after supper, not a trace of displeased or any other emotion crosses Vera's smooth brow. But after a moment an inward sense of amusement seems to oppress her. She struggles with it, but ineffectually, and finally breaks into a merry and prolonged laugh.

"What is it?" asks Kit.

"Never mind: you will know some day," returns Vera, rising, and laying her hand on Gerald's arm, who has just come to claim her for the waltz now beginning.

When they have made one turn of the room, Gerald leads her towards a conservatory, from which the gardens outside may be reached by stone steps.

"Come with me," he says, entreatingly, throwing open the door on the top of these steps. "I feel half stifled in these rooms: come into the cool night air."

For a moment she hesitates, and then, a sudden determination rising within her, she moves deliberately forward, and follows him down the steps into the moonlit grounds below.

All the land, as far as one can see, is bathed in the sorrowful chilly light of the "mystic sad capricious moon," now hastening to its death. Already the stars are beginning to lose the freshness of their fire, the shadows are growing longer and more impenetrable.

> "How well the night is made for tenderness,
> So still that the low whisper,
> Scarcely audible, is heard like music."

Beyond, where the shrubs join, and where in their midst the fountain is flinging its waters into the silent air, the moonbeams are still rioting in happy madness.

Vera, walking to the fountain, seats herself upon its marble rim, and lets her pretty bare fingers trail idly through the tiny wavelets, born of a vagrant breeze. Not one word has she willingly addressed him since he claimed her for this dance; not one word does she speak now, but, with sad dejected head half averted, gazes mournfully at the little naked winged gods that, with marble cheeks distended, blow spray into the night.

When the silence has become unendurable, Gerald breaks it.

"What is it?" he says, suddenly. "What has happened? You are changed to me! Tell me what it is."

That she is changed is beyond all doubt. Purposely so. That last mysterious scene with Sir Watkyn in the library (of which no particulars are ever learned) has made her alive to the necessity of getting rid of Burke with as little delay as possible. With this object in view, she has been studiously reserved towards him during the last twenty minutes, counting from the moment when he took her away from Kit in the anteroom. During the best part of this time she has kept her eyes sadly fixed upon the ground, has sighed once or twice, has refused to smile at any price, and has answered every question she could not avoid in monosyllables. Now, as he speaks, she, for the first time, lifts her eyes to his, and looks at him, mournfully but steadily,—very steadily.

"I must tell you what is lying on my heart," she says, at last, with a burst of the most ingenuous frankness.

She pauses here, and breathes quickly, as though breath is difficult to catch.

"Say what you will," returns Gerald, growing, however, very white.

"Do not be angry with me," entreats Vera, still apparently greatly distressed. "*Do* not. But—but—the fact is, I can't get it out of my head!"

"You mean——?" growing whiter still.

"That unhappy action of yours on board the—— No, I cannot speak of it. Do not think I bear you one unkind thought because of that momentary madness," she says, laying her slender fingers with delicate kindliness upon his arm. "But—but—" with a little shiver, "I cannot get away from it: it clings to me, and when I see *you* I see *it* all over again."

She sighs heavily.

"Ah! will you ever forget?" he says, turning away from her suddenly as one stricken to the heart.

"Perhaps in time,"—plaintively,—"if I *get* time. Just at present it dwells with me with an obstinate persistency; and at intervals—in spite of me—it renders me cold to you. You may perhaps have noticed it?" glancing at him with anxious innocent eyes.

He bows his head, and lets his face fall forward until his hands cover it.

"Yes, I cannot get it out of my mind," goes on Vera, noting with tranquil eyes the success of her words. "When I sleep it repeats itself to me in my dreams; when I awaken it is but to picture it again to myself in even clearer colors. Gerald," bending towards him, "be generous! Forgive me this folly! and—and humor me, too, in one thing more."

He lifts his miserable face and looks at her silently, imploringly.

"And this one thing?" he asks, at last, with an effort. Thoughts "too deep for swift telling" are thronging his brain. Is she going to cast him far from her into outer darkness forever and forever?

"Say it,—say it at once, if you mean it," he cries suddenly, in a terrible voice, throwing out his arms to her in a passion of despair. "Do not approach it by degrees. Kill me at once, if you must: it will be more merciful. Am I to be discarded?"

For a moment she hesitates, pondering as to whether a simple "yes" to this will not be the shortest and easiest way out of her difficulties, but a curious brilliancy in his eyes (to which she is now becoming almost accustomed) warns her to temporize. Though not, as a rule, given to regret, she now from her soul repents that she ever encouraged him by look or tone. And her encouragement had gone even deeper. Little things make up the sum of life, and that kiss she had given him—so long ago now—rises up in judgment against her.

"Oh, no, no," she says, with a hasty desire to restore him to the paths of peace. "Not that. But it is indeed true that you have unsettled my mind. Only a few short hours ago you spoke of marriage. I *could* not marry you now,—not now. In my thoughts of you there is still a—a—little fear. It is a demon, this fear, and we must cast it out. We must wait."

"I shall wait for you forever," he says, slowly. "And now what is this 'one thing' of which you speak?"

"It will be terrible for us both," says Vera, with pretty hesitation. The words come with tremulous softness from the red parted lips. To all appearance she is struggling with bravely-suppressed grief. "It is this," she says. "You must leave me for a time. You must go far away

from me, to some place where I shall be unable to see you, leaving me here to learn in solitude how to forget all that has so cruelly shaken my nerves. Think," she says, in an awe-struck whisper, "what it *might* have been,—*death!*"

"Ay, death," he says, dreamily. "'Death and his brother Sleep,' which come 'with friendliest care.'"

"No, do not talk like that," she says, with a little shiver, drawing back from him.

"Why not?" asks he, looking at her, but still dreamily. "Death has no terrors for me." He sighs, and lifts his dark passionate eyes to the paling stars in the great vault above. "What does it mean," he says, in a low tone, "but peace,—rest,—an end to the anguish of doubt,—a forgetting——"

He recovers himself by a violent effort, and looks at her again with a quick smile full of sadness.

"So I am to be banished?" he says. "No wonder I thought of death."

"But for only a little while," she reminds him, kindly. "Give me only twelve months to obliterate all remembrance of that horrible day. One short year I ask (though it will be cruelly long to me) to make me sure I have ceased to shrink from you even in my dreams, and then——"

Her voice apparently fails her.

"Then?" says Burke, eagerly.

"You may——" Again she pauses.

"Vera, what?"

"Ask of me what you will," she returns, with a smile —guileless, artless—that is like a flash of radiant light in the semi-darkness.

Gerald falls on his knees before her.

"Oh, my darling," he says, in a choked voice; and then, "Is this separation irrevocable?"

"It is," murmurs she, gently. "Dear Gerald, if you love me, go, and go at once."

"At once!"—faintly.

"Yes, to-morrow. If you would have hope in the future, do as I bid you now." Though her tone is subdued, there is no flinching in it. He lifts his eyes to hers in a silent but impassioned appeal, and reads his fate in her soft face.

"So soon!" he says, with suppressed anguish. "Vera, grant me a day."

"Stay forever, if you will," she returns, calmly, "but accept the probable consequences. I am afraid of you now. I shall be more——"

"No! no!" passionately, rising to his feet, and goaded by her terrible insinuation into strength and determination. "To-morrow I shall leave you."

"Ah, that is brave of you," murmurs she, with an as-

sumption of keeping back her own sorrow. "That is very well done, indeed."

"Some poor consolation you owe me," he says now, taking her hands and looking sadly into her eyes. "Give it to me. A few poor words I ask,—no more. Swear to me you will never marry any one, never love any one, but me."

"I swear I shall never love any one," declares she, returning his fervid gaze with a calm, earnest glance, so full of unmistakable truth that he is falsely satisfied.

Again his heart rises within him. Again Vanadis, sweet goddess of Hope, finds her throne within his breast. But grief at the coming separation conquers even her, the all-powerful.

"How shall I live without you for so long?" he cries, suddenly, with a burst of emotion. "A year! An eternity! Is there no hope? Have I so unpardonably sinned?"

"I have not spoken of sin," says Vera, with adorable sweetness. "But this thing I have arranged is, believe me, for the best. Nay, be comforted," she says, letting her hand drop lightly on his bowed head.

The touch of her slender fingers fires him.

"It shall be as you will, beloved of my life," he exclaims, with growing composure, pressing her fingers to his lips. "At least I shall carry with me your sweet assurance that you will never marry or love another."

"I shall never love another," says Vera.

"I trust you: forgive me if ever the smallest doubt of you crept into my heart. My angel! I trust you now, wholly, utterly, with my life; for faith in you *is* my life. Say you forgive me, Vera."

"I forgive you everything," returns Vera, with kindly promptitude, laying her fan with a graceful gesture across her lips. Is it to conceal a yawn?

"And now for the last arrangements," says the young man, speaking with feverish fervor. "This must be our final farewell, though I shall not be able to leave Kilmalooda to-morrow until the afternoon. But we need meet no more, until—until I come back again to claim you as—— Oh, love—oh, life—good-by."

He takes both her hands, and, raising them, kisses the pretty pink palms with lips that are icy cold, and then, lifting them still higher, lays them round his neck. For a little while neither of them speaks. Perhaps at this moment—so deep is his silent despair—she is a little sorry for him. But, I think, soaring above the sorrow is a sense of relief so keen as to overshadow it.

After a pause he puts her a little from him, and looks at her long and earnestly, as one might look for the last time upon the face of the beloved dead.

"Well, you have so arranged it," he says, in a strange ominous way that startles her; "and now indeed good-by. Good-by to you, my love. Good-by to *all* love, now and for evermore."

"Gerald!" she exclaims, surprised out of her usual calm. Her tone rouses him.

"What did I say?" he asks, wearily. "Misery has made her own of me. I hardly know what I said, but I feel there is trouble in the air. It is my own, no doubt. Good-by, sweetheart."

He presses her cool little hand to his forehead, and, with a gesture of despair, impossible to translate, crushes a fold of her white gown against his lips. Then, taking her in his arms, he kisses her lips once passionately.

And now it is all over. He is gone. As he disappears through the trees, there comes to her from over the hills the first pale streaks of the hurrying dawn. "The dark is shred by golden shafts," and slowly, slowly, up from the sea comes the cold fragrance of the early tide. Faint rays of light, young heralds of the coming god, "play among the drooping stars, kissing away their waning eyes to slumber." But Vera, sitting still upon the marble rim of the fountain, heeds not the death of the stars, or the birth of morn, or the chill of the waking breeze.

Idly, absently, she draws her white fingers through the ripples of the trembling water. She does not lift her eyes, but sits in the same gracefully dejected attitude, until the click of a little latch in a rustic gate at some distance tells her Gerald has passed through it and is seeking the house by an unfrequented path.

Then she draws her fingers from the water and dries them carefully upon her handkerchief.

"I'm afraid they are dreadfully red," she says, regretfully, "but it should be done. Had I changed my position he would have noticed it at once. I dare say he had his eye on me to the last. He'd be sure to want a 'final farewell' sort of glance; and, at all events, it would have been a risky thing to alter the forlorn attitude until he was well out of sight. The folly lay in letting these poor little fingers"—with a glance of the sorriest consideration at the small pink members in question—"touch the water at all. But," comfortably, "I'm not *often* foolish, and I dare say I did owe him something." At this generous confession, quite a little glow of self-righteousness suffuses her cheek. "I must hide my hands before I return in-doors. What a comfort, he forgot to ask for one of my gloves as a fond memento to weep over during his exile." She draws on her long suèdes as she speaks, and buttons them carefully. "Good heavens! what a row there will be when he

finds it out!" she says, with a little laugh, that has in it a tincture of amusement; "but I shall take care he is kept in ignorance until expostulation will be useless. How I wish it was the day after to-morrow, and that he was safely gone!"

She gathers up the train of her gown without any undue haste, and steps lightly, with all the buoyancy of a youthful and untroubled heart, towards the lights in the ball-room windows.

"If Sir Watkyn meets me going in, I shall say I went out alone to escape my other partners," she thinks, comfortably. "If one of my other partners meets me, I shall say I went out to escape Sir Watkyn. Dear me! what a fuss poor Gerald made! So glad he didn't cry, however. The others all did, and they looked *horrid*, when drenched. Poor Gerald!—quite a nice fellow, too, and *so* handsome! What a grievous pity it is he should be so intense!"

CHAPTER XXXII.

"Thy mind is lorn, thou janglest as a jay
Thy face is turned in a new array."

"An empty sky, a world of heather,
Purple of foxglove, yellow of broom."

THESE words come to Doris as she stands next day at a window, gazing upon the beautiful earth outside. The sun is blazing high in the heavens; whole fields of golden furze upon the hills yonder are making a mass of color dazzling to behold. She is watching the winding pathway through the fields, by which the Coole people will probably come to her by and by, Monica having openly declared her inability to stay at home during the afternoon in an "upset house."

It is, however, in merest idleness she watches this path as yet, as it is far too early an hour to expect Monica or any of her household. Doris herself had not gone to bed at all. Some unaccountable feeling of restlessness had kept her awake and had sent her wandering through the dewy gardens on her return from the dance at Coole. She had plucked some flowers, had fastened some among the laces of her morning gown, had wandered in-doors again, and now, seated in the breakfast-room, with all the windows thrown wide to let the happy sun rush freely in, is trifling absently with a huge bunch of orange-eyed tags that lie

upon her lap, rendering her almost faint from the excess of their sweetness.

She is looking beautiful,—not fatigued, but daintily languid. Her eyes are larger than usual, and tiny dark circles lie beneath them; her hair is somewhat loosely arranged. She is smiling to herself as she bends over her flowers, and is plainly lost in a happy revery,—so happy that she starts violently when a voice at her elbow rouses her to the consciousness of some one's nearness.

It is a cold voice, distinctly but politely unfriendly. It is Clontarf's.

"I fancied you still in bed," he says, as though aggrieved at her presence here.

"I have not been to bed at all. The morning was so sweet, I could not bear to lose it."

"And your thoughts, no doubt, so happy."

Something in his tone compels her to look at him. She flushes faintly.

"Do you grudge me a few happy thoughts?" she asks. "You need not, they come to me so seldom."

This reply secretly and most unjustly infuriates him.

"You mean me to understand by that that your life is a miserable one?"

"Oh, no; not *miserable*."

"At least, then, that you are seldom happy?"

"Few people are *often* happy."

"You were last night."

If his life had depended upon it, he could not have refrained from making her this speech, with such cruel pertinacity has his mind clung to the belief that her enjoyment of the Coole ball had been solely caused by the presence there of Colonel Bouverie. Not that the faintest suspicion of his wife's honor taints his soul, only an overpowering anger that she should feel light-hearted with another when she will scarcely deign to vouchsafe a smile to him.

After another swift glance at him, Doris says, calmly,—

"Yes. I don't know when I enjoyed myself so much as I did last night."

"So I could see,"—moodily.

"I thought it was quite the pleasantest dance I was ever at in my life."

"I could see that, too,"—with increasing gloom.

"You must have been watching me very closely to see so much. I had no idea that at any time, or under *any* circumstances, I could be an object of such interest to you."

"Not to me alone. I should think every one was watching you."

Her color deepens.

"You pay me too high a compliment," she says, haughtily. "I am not altogether so beautiful as you apparently deem me."

Silence.

Having waited for a retort, and been disappointed at its non-arrival, she is naturally irritated, and, woman-like, betrays the irritation.

"Do people find it so strange a thing to see another happy that they must needs stare?" she says, pushing back the loose soft hair from her forehead with one hand, and glancing at him defiantly. "If so, I must have roused their curiosity to an unheard-of extent last night, because for once I put dull care behind me and enjoyed myself, as I have already said, more than I can tell you."

"I dare say," says Clontarf, wrathfully. "It is inconvenient to tell some things."

She lifts her eyes quickly to his. Indignation and reproach create a fire in them that might have scorched him, had he looked. He is wise in his generation, however, and refrains from the look.

"You want to say something unkind to me," she says, disdainfully. "Say it. Are you *afraid*, that you hesitate?"

Thus driven to speech, his anger flames into life.

"I will," he says, turning to her a face as white as death. "I believe, from what I saw last night, that you have a *reason* for regretting the unfortunate tie that binds you to me."

Again silence falls between them,—this time a terrible silence. That she has grown deadly pale,—that her large eyes are dilating, that her bosom is rising and falling with passionate irregularity, that her lips are white and parted, is all known to him in a vague, uncertain fashion.

Then suddenly she moves. She clasps her hands together and rises to her feet, letting all her pretty flowers fall to the ground unheeded.

"You are a most cruel man!" she says, in a low, intense voice that vibrates with passion.

Tall, and pale, and trembling, she looks at him, and then, without another word, turns and leaves the room.

* * * * * * * * * *

Subdued by her indignation, but still at heart desperately angry, Clontarf stands steadily eying the fallen tags, and telling himself, with a great show of heat, that if they are to lie there until he picks them up, there they are likely to lie till chaos comes again. *His* hand will not be the one to raise them from their fallen position.

Alas for our sternest determinations, before many minutes have passed he is on his knees before those very flow-

ers, and, having lifted each blossom separately and with care, goes even further, and essays to arrange them artistically in a little Etruscan vase he finds on a table near.

Having so far given in to the enemy, it is but a small step more to wish the enemy a friend.

"I have behaved abominably," says the repentant Donat, gazing at the Etruscan vase. "I'll have to apologize. It's awfully hard to apologize successfully to a woman, without giving her something. By Jove! I have it. I heard her say to Brian last night she would give her eyes—or something or other—for a pug. Callaghan has one for sale at seventeen guineas. I'll go and fetch it. She may not accept the apology, but at all events she is sure to accept the dog, and that will be a step in the right direction."

* * * * * * *

Meantime, Doris, angry, hurt, quivering in every nerve, has hurried out to the garden once more, and now with hurrying feet is pacing to and fro.

"He is cruel, unjust, and vilely suspicious," she says to herself, her voice broken by dry and angry sobs. "How *dare* he speak to me like that?—how dare he? I am not of his world, perhaps, but time—time has taught me that I can do him justice in it, and bring no blush of shame to his brow because of my low origin. Can he not see this? His father sees it. 'Why should my birth keep down my mounting spirit?' I am young,—I am——" she hesitates, then, as though in despite of herself, flings out her arms to the soft air, and cries aloud,—"yes, I *am* beautiful! Why must this one man of all the world refuse to acknowledge it?"

She is trembling so violently that she stops, and, leaning against a tree, tries hard to recover her composure.

There had been a little shower in the dawning of the day, that had played upon the air and made it cool and sweet. It is still wandering idly over the grasses and the trees. There is indeed something ultra-pathetic in its music as it rustles through branch and leaf and bough. It strikes as sadly upon Doris's heart as though it were the knell of hopes departed. She had once—a long time since, as now it seems—believed it possible that the day might come in which she should know her husband's heart to be entirely hers, but now that hope seems forever to have flown.

Leaning upon the little rustic bridge to which she now has come, she lets her sad tears fall, to swell the rushing of the tiny river down below, that seems hurrying swiftly onwards, as though in cruel haste to bear away from her to the great lonely ocean even the last fond fancy of a happiness that might have been.

Slowly she dries her eyes, and slowly returns to the house. Upon the threshold a servant meets her.

"Miss Costello's love, my lady, and she desired me say she would be very glad if you would go to her as soon as you came in."

"She is in her room still?"

"Yes, my lady."

Believing Vera has sent for her to gossip gayly over last night's joys and shortcomings, she goes leisurely up-stairs to her room, and taps lightly at her door.

"Come in," says Vera, and, entering, she is met by a radiant little figure, all smiles and waving locks and beaming eyes, who presses her into a lounging-chair and kneels down beside her.

"Truant," says Vera, "where have you been? The moment I woke I wanted you, and you were nowhere. Is that conduct becoming a woman and a sister? Cry *mea culpa* at once, and I will forgive you, because there is something on my mind, something that happened last night, that I must tell you."

Doris glances at her with a sudden flash of interest in her eyes.

"Last night?" she says, quickly. "Ah! I think I can guess what it is."

"Can you?" says Vera. In her usual little kittenish fashion, she curls herself round upon the Persian rug and rubs her cheek against Doris's knee. "Well, yes, I suppose so. He"—the sweet childish voice grows almost plaintive—"he proposed to me last night, in the library, after supper."

"And——?" says Doris, breathlessly.

"And? Oh, I see. I accepted him, of course."

"I am so glad!" says Doris, tears gathering in her eyes. "I knew it would all come right at last, though there were moments when I feared. He was always so devoted to you, —so earnest in his attachment."

"Yes, very devoted, and for such a long time now," says Vera, thoughtfully. She has picked up a big cinder from the grate, and with her dainty fingers lays it on the burning coals. Though May, it is still very chilly in-doors.

"I congratulate you with all my heart," says Doris, fondly, slipping her arm round the girl's white neck. "It is just what I wished. He is so desirable in every way."

"That is what I think," says Vera, with some soft enthusiasm.

"And so handsome!"

"Oh, well, as to *that*," exclaims Vera, laughing a little, "that is as it may be. 'Handsome is as handsome does,'

you know. I don't think *I* should call him exactly handsome."

"Little hypocrite!" says Doris, pinching her cheek. "You want to make me praise him even beyond his deserts."

"Well, money no doubt covers a multitude of sins," says Vera, with a careless shrug, "but perhaps one might be excused for wishing his nose a trifle more pronounced."

"You would make me his trumpeter, for very love of him," continues Doris, still smiling. "I tell you, I will not accept the situation. I shall only go so far as to say I think you could not have made a worthier choice."

"I am so glad you agree with me about this affair," says Vera, turning up—oh!—such a youthful, lovable face to her sister. "Others may say disagreeable things, but that I shan't mind, with you on my side. I think I have been sensible all through, and of course, as we both know, a title always counts."

"*A title!*" As though the word possesses an unbearable sting, Doris shrinks away from the lovely serene face beneath hers, and stares at it in horrified doubt.

"Why, yes, dearest. When I marry him, I shall be Lady Wylde, shall I not?"

"Lady Wylde!" repeats her sister, as if stunned.

"Well, certainly not Lady anything else?" says Vera, petulantly.

"It can't be true!" exclaims Doris, with intense excitement. "Vera, *say* it is not! It is monstrous, unnatural! I will not believe it. It is some hideous jest." Pushing back her chair, she rises, and paces the room in an agitated manner, with a pale face and trembling hands.

Vera, springing noiselessly to her feet, goes to her, and, laying her arms around her neck, brings her to a standstill.

"You are angry with me," she says, with unfeigned regret. "Why?"

"Are you going to tell me you have made up your mind to ruin Gerald Burke's life?"

"That is one way of putting it. I have refused him, it is true; but why should that ruin him?"

"You have refused him?"

"Not in exact words, perhaps, but in reality—Yes."

"You have thrown honest, earnest love behind you for the sake of a paltry title?"

"I do not consider it paltry. It is a very old title, and a rich one."

"I would not have believed it of you!" cries Doris, in a choked voice, refusing to return her caresses.

"But why?—*why?*" asks Vera, resentfully. "What am

I doing that half the world has not done before me,—what you (*you yourself*, who condemn me) have done? Have you not set me the example? *You* married for position, thinking it better than love, and you have been sufficiently happy. Why may I not follow in your path?"

"It is a lie!" says Doris, with sudden and terrible vehemence. "I am *not* happy. I know no single moment that is not fraught with agonizing regret. I speak the truth now—for the first time since my loveless marriage—openly for your sake, in the hope that my miserable experience may induce *you* to draw back from the abyss that lies before you. I implore you to hesitate before it is too late. Money, rank, position, all are worthless without love."

Her voice sinks to a whisper. She covers her face with her hands.

"And *I* think love is worthless without all these things you name," returns Vera, calmly. "I do not want to argue with you, Dody, but I will say that I believe you go the wrong way about enjoying life. You are too earnest, too——"

"Forget me," says Lady Clontarf, a little coldly. "Put me out of the question altogether. Think only of yourself. To discuss me and my nature now is waste of time. So you are determined, then, to wed yourself with December, although May is pining for you?"

"But I do not pine for May, if you mean Gerald. I am sorry if I displease you, Dody, but I cannot make myself romantic. I hate scenes, and bursts of emotion, and lovers' quarrels, and such like, they make one so uncomfortable. And, after all, what crime is it I am going to commit, that you should look at me like that? Why may I not be happy in my own way?"

"But such a way! It is a sacrifice. You—with your youth—your beauty—to give yourself willingly to that old man, who——"

"Tush," said Vera, interrupting her gayly. "Remember, only a moment since, you were impressing upon me the fact of his great personal beauty. 'Handsome' you called my intended,—not knowing. And, indeed, I will not listen to a word against him. He has been quite nice to me all through, and his suggestions about settlements have been most delicate and generous. He will suit me down to the ground. I shall be a veritable old man's darling, shall I not?"

She breaks into a soft mirthful laugh. She looks so pretty, so childish, so endearing, as she asks this cruel question, that Doris bursts into tears.

"Oh, it is horrible!—*horrible!*" she cries, sobbing bitterly.

In a moment Vera's arms are round her.

"Listen to me," she says, earnestly. "Your tears are wasted upon me. I have no heart! I never had one, except for you. I love you, and you only. For the rest, as long as I have sunshine, and admiration, and money, and the world at my feet, I shall never know even a parsing pang."

CHAPTER XXXIII.

"I am so confused that I cannot say;
But mercy, lady bright, that knowest well
My thought, and seest what harm that I feel,
Consider all this, and rue upon my sore."

DESCENDING the stairs slowly from her sister's room, Doris enters the library. A low snuffling whine greets her approach. Glancing, in some surprise, to where the sound apparently comes from, she finds herself face to face with her husband, and a most adorable pug, all tail and fat, and a nose as crumpled as the proverbial rose-leaf.

"It's—he's—*she's*—for *you*," says Donat, confusedly, coming towards her and proffering her the dog at arm's length.

"For me?" says Doris, coloring with pleasure. "Who has given him to me?"

"No one; I mean, I brought him up from Callaghan's Farm just now. I heard you say last night you wanted a pug, and so—This is a nice little thing, I think—eh? I hope you will like her?"

"You remembered what I said?—how good of you!" says Doris, in a low voice. She has the pug in her arms now, and, bending over it as she says this, she caresses its black muzzle softly.

"And there's another thing," says Donat, a dark flush dyeing his cheeks. "I—er—forgot myself this morning: I said what I should not have said, you know. I beg your pardon. May I hope you will forgive me?"

"You do not believe that what you said was true?" asks she, gravely, her voice trembling.

"That you could ever even *think* anything worthy of rebuke, I do not believe; that you might learn to love some one different from me in all respects"—here he turns abruptly away to the window—"seems to me the most natural thing in the world."

"But if I tell you I have not done so, you will believe me?" says Doris, anxiously, following him to the window.

"*Can* you tell me that?" His tone is agitated, his eyes are very earnest, as he asks her this.

"I can, indeed," answers she, simply. Then a moment later she turns to him with a shy laugh. "And now to thank you for this dear, dear dog," she says. "What a face she has!—grave as a philosopher, grave as yours,"—archly. "See! she has taken to me already. She wants to rub her nose against my cheek. How shall I ever repay you for so sweet a gift?"

"Easily, if you will."

"Certainly I will."

"My past offence still lies heavy on my breast; and as yet you have not granted me open absolution."

"How am I to grant it?"

"Let us kiss and be friends," says Clontarf, with an audacity that astonishes even himself.

An expression of mingled displeasure and distress changes her face in a moment. She moves away from him. A little angry flush, rising rapidly, dyes cheek and brow crimson. Seeing how cruel is her confusion, he removes his eyes from hers.

"I beg your pardon," he says, hurriedly. "Of course I should not have said that, even in jest. Believe me, I never seriously hoped for so great a reward. I never for one moment imagined you would grant it. It was a ridiculous speech of mine, and rather a rude one. Try to think no more about it."

He laughs, but rather artificially, and, stepping on to the balcony outside the window, paces rapidly up and down, whistling softly.

But the whistling has an affected sound, and after a little bit ceases altogether.

Doris watches him furtively over the sleek head of her newly-acquired treasure. Now, why on earth did he make that odious remark? He seems sorry for it now, very sorry,—glancing at his unquiet walk upon the balcony. It was a mistake, but—but not so grievous a one that she need have given him so severe a rebuke,—though it was only by a glance. Yes, she had looked at him very unkindly, *too* unkindly, and just when he had made her so charming a present, too. She presses the little fat pug to her breast. But looks don't kill, and—and he needn't have been so very sure—all in one moment—that his suggestion about—about the best way of making friends would be so distasteful to her. Here she checks herself, and blushes even a deeper crimson than before, and seeks to hide her flushed cheeks in the satin wrinkles of her pretty pug.

But even the fattest, ugliest wrinkles fail to satisfy at times. After a lengthened trial of them, Doris raises her

head, and walks with a charming determination on to the balcony.

"Lord Clontarf," she says, nervously.

"Why can't you call me by my name?" asks Clontarf, turning upon her with sudden anger.

"I thought it *was* your name," returns she, meekly.

"Not to you."

"Donat," murmurs she from behind the pug's back, so sweetly that all at once his anger is disarmed, and defenceless he advances towards her. "Ah, why need we be always quarrelling?" murmurs she, tucking her arm sadly but confidentially into his.

"Why, indeed?" says Clontarf, pressing the arm to his side.

"And there is something I want to tell you, too."

"Tell me anything you like," says Clontarf.

"Well, it is about Vera," confesses she, reluctantly, a touch of anxiety creeping into her beautiful face. "It is the strangest story; the saddest, I think." And then she tells him all about it.

"Do you mean to tell me she has thrown over Gerald for that old baboon?" exclaims Clontarf, when her dismal tale has come to an end.

"She is certainly going to marry Sir Watkyn."

"Well, there is no accounting for tastes," says Donat, shrugging his shoulders disdainfully. "But what a contrast between the two men! After all, I believe most women would sell their souls for a title!"

The words have no sooner passed his lips than he would have given his life to recall them. Too late!—not even that great sacrifice could obliterate them from her mind.

Then, in a moment, he has flung himself at her feet and has encircled her with his arms.

"Don't think I meant that, Doris," he exclaims, passionately. "How should I, of all men, dare to say it to you?—I, who had the meanness to—to marry you for your money!"

He makes this confession bravely, and in her soul she honors him for it.

"We acknowledge our sins, let us now make the best of our bad bargain," she says, faintly, yet with an irrepressible smile. "By the bye, have you had any breakfast?"

Her sudden and graceful change of conversation kills all awkwardness, and sets them once more at ease with each other.

"A cup of tea, yes; but, now that I think of it, a cup of tea isn't much, is it? I don't know how *you* feel," he says, with a friendly laugh, "but I feel rather done up. I haven't slept a wink since seven o'clock yesterday morning. Tea, I own, is an unrivalled comfort on most occa-

sions, but just now—Come! have some champagne and seltzer *tête-à-tête* with me, to prove to me you have forgiven my ill temper of an hour ago."

"What o'clock is it?"

"Just twelve," looking at his watch, with a little yawn.

"Well, if only to keep you awake, I consent," returns she, lightly.

At this moment a servant presents to her a small twisted note.

"From Gerald," she murmurs, sorrowfully, when she has read it, holding it out to Clontarf. "Just a line, to say he must leave us to-day by the mid-day train. Ah! poor fellow! of course he feels this whole affair keenly."

"He would, you know," says Clontarf.

"Still, as she doesn't love him, I dare say she was right to refuse him," says Doris, anxious to defend her Bébé.

"Might she have not learned to love him? Is time quite powerless?" asks he, regarding her earnestly.

"There is always the risk," returns she, curling the pug's tail round and round her finger.

"Is there not the same risk for Sir Watkyn?" demands he, hotly.

"Ah! do not let us talk of that," entreats she, wincing a little. She rises abruptly, and, going to the window, gazes out again upon the woodland path that may bring to her Monica,—a path that can be seen as well from the library as from the windows of the breakfast-room.

"Ah! here they come at last," she says, glad of the advancing interruption, and pointing down far away in the valley to where, from between the waving trees, a small train of pedestrians has come into sight. As she speaks, she leans forward until her head is outside the window. It is an old-fashioned lattice-window, and now a sudden breeze arising blows one lattice in her direction.

"Take care," says Clontarf, hastily, thrusting his hand over her shoulder to force back the offending window ere it can touch her. "I wish the men would be more careful about fastening back these absurd windows when opening them," he continues, in a tone of annoyance. "It did not hurt you?"

"It did not touch me."

Bringing his hand in again, he lets it fall upon her shoulder; and when he has asked his question he still lets it rest there. It is the shoulder farthest from him, so that literally he has his arm round her neck.

A sense of shyness, the most acute, takes possession of Doris, but a sense of unspeakable gladness too. Yes, there is no longer any use in disguising the truth from herself, she *likes* his arm round her neck. She loves him! Ay,

though it may be that he will never love her! This knowledge is humiliating, the more so in that it is incontrovertible.

"What an exquisite view of the sea one gets from this!" she says, in a frantic hurry to rush into conversation of any sort, with a view to showing how utterly indifferent she is to the nearness of that unruly arm.

No answer.

"Don't you think it pretty?" she asks, desperately, feeling silence means destruction. As she speaks, she forces herself to look at him, and is at once hopelessly disconcerted by the discovery that he is looking at her.

"I think it beautiful," he says; but whether he means the sea or her face, is an open question: certainly he is not looking at the sea.

"I didn't know you admired it so very much," says Doris, growing more and more troubled. "I never heard you speak of it before."

"That would not prevent my thinking of it."

"No; of course not." Then, getting desperate as she feels she can endure his gaze no longer, "If you see so many charms in it, why don't you look at it?" she exclaims, impatiently.

"I *am* looking at it." Here he recovers himself, and with admirable promptitude makes sense of his extraordinary remark. "Your eyes are the very color of it when it reflects the blue sky," he says.

Doris struggles with her dignity for a moment, and then gives way: she bursts into merriest laughter.

"Since when have you taken to studying the ocean?" she asks, with a charming mischievous glance, and then, slipping from him, runs down the balcony steps to greet Monica and the others on the lawn.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

"With that my hand in his he took anon,
Of which I comfort caught."

"Then may ye see that all things have an end,
There helpeth nought, all go that ilkë way;
Then may I say that allë things must die."

"WE'VE come," says Kit, joyously, making her superfluous remark with the utmost *naïveté*.

"At the risk of our lives," supplements Mr. Browne, who is looking as fresh as though dancing all night, accom-

panied by many suppers at unearthly hours, were naught but a simple and wholesome tonic. "We fell into three brooks on our way here, and over two stone walls, to say nothing of frequent undignified flights before horned animals. We have suffered much, but we regret nothing. Virtue is its own reward! Assume it, Kit, although you have it not."

"Don't take us into the house, Doris," says Monica, plaintively, sinking into a garden-chair with a mildly determined air of not going a step farther to please anybody. "It is so warm in there and so sweet out here, and now I am in this chair I don't believe I could get out of it again to save my life. Brian, where are you? Plead for me! *Where is* Brian? What on earth is the good of having a husband, if he isn't always on the spot when one wants him?"

"I'm so glad you don't want to go in," says Doris, seating herself beside her,—which is the solemn truth, visions of her aunt, Mrs. Costello, pouncing down upon them unawares (carrying all before her and routing her enemies with great slaughter), being always present to her when in-doors. Open-air regions, however, are generally free from the presence of this engaging old lady.

"Wasn't last night a success?" exclaims Vera, coming toward them now, with smiling lips and radiant brow, ignorant of grief. She is dressed in a soft white gown, guiltless of even one fleck of color; such a gown as a fair virgin perchance might wear upon her bridal day,—or lying in her shroud!

Her pretty hair—that Phœbus has dyed "like to the streames of his burned heat"—is lying in loose sunny curls upon her little head, and, as she moves, they move too, as though in unison with her happy mood. Her eyes are sparkling, her lips red and full of childish gladness. There is no thought of cankering care in her whole bearing; she seems the very embodiment of youth and love,—a thing all life and laughter, to whom stern reality can never be more than a passing shadow. She has run swiftly to them now from the house, and a faint tinge of palest pink that has crept into her cheeks is making her look like a woodland sprite.

> "But for to tellë you all her beauty,
> It lies not in my tongue, nor my conning."

"It was such a happy time that I still grieve for it," she says, throwing herself breathlessly in a little graceful heap at Doris's feet. Whereupon they all at once fall into a lengthened discussion of last night's joys and woes, its unutterable blisses and its damnatory drawbacks.

Presently it is discovered that Mr. Browne and Brian Desmond are in high dispute.

"*That* girl!" says Mr. Browne, indignantly. "Call *her* a nice girl! Ye gods! what an insult to Mrs. Desmond! I suppose you called your wife a nice girl before you married her, didn't you?"

"Never!" says Mrs. Desmond, emphatically, and with rather a shocked air. "'A nice girl,' my dear Dicky! What could have put such an impossible idea into your head?"

"I still maintain Miss Mountjoy is a person to be highly recommended," persists Brian, stoutly. "To me, she proved last night an incalculable blessing."

"There are such things as 'cursed blessings,'" mutters Mr. Browne, moodily. "I'm not saying anything naughty, I assure you, Lady Clontarf: I am only quoting Bishop Hall. He was quite a good old man! He must have known some one like Miss Mountjoy when he wrote that."

"She was awfully good to me about Andy Warren," says Brian. "You know, a girl can't be got to look at him since that breach of promise affair with Miss Blake; and there he stood glancing at me from a door-way all night, as if it was *my* fault he had shirked his engagement and brought down the wrath of woman on his head."

"Detestable man!" says Monica. "I hope he was wretched. He richly deserved it. How could he expect any woman to be civil to him, after the disgraceful way in which he jilted that poor girl?"

"Oh! she's all right, if you mean Miss Blake. She married six months afterwards, on the strength of the three thousand pounds she got out of Andy. And, at all events, what I wanted to say was that Cecily Mountjoy consented to be civil to him, when I asked her."

"I'd like to see the man she wouldn't be civil to," mutters Mr. Browne, in high disgust. "She's wickedly ugly! It amounts to a crime! She is more like a giraffe than a woman: look at her walk! 'She goes antickly and shows outward hideousness' to such an extent that no fellow could stand her; even Warren couldn't! He put her off on me, first opportunity: I call it beastly mean! Any fellow who has got a partner he wants to be rid of, instantly looks me up and palms her off on me."

"Poor Dicky!" says Kit, pathetically.

"Never mind him," says Lord Clontarf: "he would die if he hadn't his grumble. 'He speaks plain cannon-fire, and smoke, and bounce,' but nobody heeds him. And I don't believe it was Andy's desire to rid himself of Miss Mountjoy that brought her to Dicky's arms, but an overpowering longing on *her* part to mingle her sentiments

with the fascinating youth before us. We all know how irresistible our Dicky can be at times."

"Oh, yes, I like that," says Dicky, but he softens. "I wouldn't mind her so much," he continues, "if she wasn't so aggressive! if she wasn't so determined to let you know that—er—she was always all there, in fact."

"My dear fellow, where else could you expect her to be? You don't suppose she can cut herself up in small pieces at pleasure and distribute herself among her friends, do you?"

"No, no, thank goodness!" says Mr. Browne, devoutly. "To have her disseminated all over the globe would be more than I could endure. It would preclude all hope of escape."

"Mrs. Montague Smith was looking charming," says Brian. "Those iridescent beads, or whatever they were, were immensely becoming. But she wouldn't look at any one but Scarlet and McDermot. By the bye, Clontarf, you were out of the running last night. I thought you were her nearest and dearest."

"She threw me over mercilessly," laughs Clontarf, who in truth had declined her smiles and her glances for a reason that pride forbids his acknowledging even to himself, and yet in his soul he knows it was to prove to Doris his honest indifference to her that he had done this thing.

"She sat half the night in the long conservatory with Scarlet," says Dicky, in an offended tone. "No one could get her to dance. She said she was tired,—*so* tired! Then McDermot went in, and he sat on her other hand, and——"

Kit laughs.

"What is amusing you?" demands Mr. Browne, severely.

"Oh! poor Mrs. Montague Smith!" says Kit. "Did they *both* sit on her hands? How dreadful for her! Think what a heavy man Mr. Scarlet is. I'm afraid there can't be a bone left in the hand *he* chose as a seat."

"Kit is light-headed this afternoon: she has not yet recovered from her violent flirtation with old Lord Kinchinore," says Brian. "You should have seen his poor old wife's face all the time. I hope she won't sue for a divorce on the grounds of his faithlessness last night. What attraction had he for you, Kit?"

"Dear old thing, I'm quite fond of him," says Kit, genially, "and he is amusing, too, in many ways, though you might not think it. He talks very well, in spite of his broken front tooth."

"Let bygones be bygones!" says Brian, in a tone of grave reproof.

"By the bye, Doris, your man of war looked very handsome last night," says Monica, suddenly. "I mean Colonel Bouverie. What a charming face he has!"

Doris grows first red, and then very pale. All that had passed between her and her husband about this man in the morning rushes back to her now. She remembers each look, each angry tone. Will he, too, recall it all to mind? Will this idle innocent speech of Monica's add strength to the foolish doubt within his breast?

She lets her fan fall to the ground with a little crash, and is making an elaborate attempt to recover it (to give herself time to frame some answer to Monica's remark), when it is picked up and returned to her by Clontarf himself.

Then a moment later she feels he is leaning on the back of her chair in friendly fashion, and is talking to Monica over her head.

"I think his charm lies chiefly in his expression," he is saying of the absent Bouverie, whose right ear ought to be generously tinged with pink, if the old adage holds good. "I believe there are few men so popular as Bouverie. I hope we shall be able to persuade him to come to us in the autumn, for the partridges. You will ask him, Doris, won't you?"

He lays his hand lightly but significantly on her shoulder as he says this, and almost compels her by his pressure to turn her face to his. She obeys his touch, and sees something in his expression that tells her he is dumbly asking pardon of her for that unjust accusation of some hours agone. She grants it by a smile, that lights up her lips and eyes with such a rare sweetness as he has never seen on woman's face before.

He returns it faintly, but with a sigh; then, rousing himself, walks over again to where Desmond is standing. Whereupon Monica instantly draws her chair close up to Doris, and enters into a low-toned confidence with her; which confidence at once begets another, and ends by placing Monica in full possession of the facts of Vera's engagement to Sir Watkyn.

"So here is my poor little sister going to marry a man old enough to be her grandfather,—for the sake of his money!" says Lady Clontarf, with a deep sigh.

"And here is my sister going perversely to marry a man who has *no* money," says Monica, with another sigh that puts Lady Clontarf's to shame.

"You mean Neil?" says Doris.

"Yes,—yes, indeed," dolefully.

There is a step upon the sward behind them.

"Ah! talk of somebody——" Doris has barely time to murmur in a soft warning whisper, when Brabazon—who has ridden over from his cousin's place—stands before them.

Having greeted them with a somewhat grave and pre-

occupied air, he walks quickly up to Kit, and, taking the hand she gladly gives him, holds it.

"Come away with me,—away from these others; there is something I must tell you at once," he says, in a low, impressive tone.

Half frightened by his unsmiling countenance, she goes with him over lawn and gravelled paths and through the shrubberies to the deserted garden beyond.

Here all is quiet; not a sound, save the rippling of the little stream yonder, disturbs the drowsy stillness of the hour; even the distant voices on the lawn they have just left do not travel so far as this.

"What is it?" asks Kit, growing more and more nervous, as he still remains silent. "Ah! I can guess what it is! that horrid old man your uncle has been tormenting you again."

"Oh! *don't*, darling," says Brabazon, starting visibly. "I—I'm awfully sorry now I ever said a word against him."

"Well, I'm not," says Miss Beresford, stoutly. "I'm delighted! Every word I ever said I repeat now, with variations, and preludes, and interludes, and choruses, and everything but finales! Mean old thing! How *can* you defend him, Neil?"

"Kit!" begins Brabazon, in a troubled voice.

"It is no use your appealing to me!" says Kit, airily. "Whatever abuses I may have showered upon his head in the past, I shower again to-day fourfold! Would that my showers might drown him! I shall certainly continue to speak disrespectfully of that bad old man, as long as I live."

"Oh, no, you will not, when——"

"Yes, I shall, indeed!" says Kit. "His treatment of you has been infamous.—Well, I can see you have some fresh outrage to disclose. What has he done now?"

"He has died!" says the young man, in a low, solemn tone, covering his face with his hands.

Dead silence. The murmur of the tiny stream is now so loud as to seem positively deafening.

Kit, who has turned deadly pale, bursts into tears.

"Oh! not *that*," she cries, in a passion of remorse; "say anything but that! Oh! *poor* old man! What wicked thoughts were in my head! Oh! I'm sorry, sorry, *sorry* I said what I did."

"Yes; that is the dreadful part of it," says Neil, in whose arms of course she has been since her first sob. "We have been saying such hard things of him all these past months, and, after all, he used to be very good to me. He died last night."

"When we were dancing?"

"Yes. Doesn't it sound brutal? Dancing when he was lying cold and dead, and when that poor woman, Lady Brabazon, was in such sore distress! Poor old chap! he used to be 'A 1' at tipping a fellow at school; I used quite to look forward to his visits there."

"How did you hear of it?"

"His solicitor came down to me about two hours ago. I hadn't an idea of anything until he said to me, 'This is a very sad business, 'Sir Neil.'"

"Sir Neil!" It sounds so strange to her—the new title—that she looks at him with startled eyes; it is as though it changed him from the Neil she knows,—her own, her lover! She feels jealous of it, and a little uncertain of everything, until his fond caresses restore her to her old happy trust.

"Weir—that's the solicitor—thought I had heard of it. He had written a telegram, but his clerk must have delayed sending it. Anyhow, it did not come until after his arrival. You know poor Sir Michael's place is in the next county, so it didn't take Weir long to come. I never felt so shocked! But the title did not surprise me. I had so often before my uncle's unexpected marriage pictured you, darling, *darling*,"—straining her to him,—"as Lady Brabazon, that the Sir Neil came naturally enough."

"Was it very sudden?"

"Very. Quite sudden. He had gone into the library after dinner, and when at eleven o'clock he did not come up as usual to bed, Lady Brabazon went to look for him. It was she found him dead,—poor thing!"

"Poor, poor thing!"

"Weir told me a good deal. I've known him since I was a boy, and there has always been a great friendship between us. He said something about being pleased that I must inherit, the little child being a girl, and no chance of—that is, no likelihood—of its having a brother or sister, don't you know."

"Then you are the heir, Neil?"

"Yes, after all. And Sir Michael, it appears, made no will. He was always going to, Weir said, but never could bring himself to the point, a superstitious fear of death preventing him. So that, literally, I inherit everything. Of course such and such things go to Lady Brabazon, and—and there is a good deal of personal property, and a considerable sum of ready money, to all of which she is welcome. Besides, there is a small property out to the west, about nine hundred a year or so, that comes to me with the rest, but which we needn't care about, need we? And it appears she is fond of this place, because there is a pretty

house on it that she built herself; and so I knew, darling, you would like me to make her a present of it. And I told Weir to go back and tell her it was hers, and to do everything else he could think of to comfort her, until I could go myself. I said she was to claim anything she wished. I knew that was what *you* would wish, too."

"It is all so like you," says Kit, with tears in her eyes. "You are the kindest, dearest fellow in all the world!" She pulls him down to her (there is not much difficulty in the doing of this) and kisses him. "And you are *mine!*" she adds, with soft exultation.

"There is one thing more I must say to you," says Brabazon, "whether it is heartless or not. I cannot get it out of my own mind, and so I want to put it into yours. It is this. I have now eight thousand a year, and we can be married as soon as ever we like."

Kit blushes a divine crimson.

"And that will be very soon, won't it?" says her lover.

There is but one satisfactory answer to such a question as this, although it is a wordless one. It is given at once.

"Weir said Lady Brabazon would be anxious to see me, so I shall have to run for it if I mean to catch the up train at Bandon," says Neil, presently, "but I'll be back to you, if possible, to-morrow. If not, I shall send a telegram. I suppose there will be some things to do, and I shall have to see to the funeral. You know the address: you will write to me if I cannot come?"

"You know that." Then, as they are walking slowly back to where they left the others, she suddenly stops him again.

"You are *really* a baronet?" she says.

"Yes."

"And I shall be Lady Brabazon?"

"Please God, darling."

"And it is eight thousand a year?"

"Or perhaps a little more."

"Well, now," says Miss Beresford, with pardonable triumph in her tone, "I should like to know what Monica has to say!"

Brabazon bursts out laughing for the first time to-day.

"Come, let us ask her," he says.

CHAPTER XXXV.

"For worldly joy holds not but by a wire."

"Loving is an office of despair."

THEY do ask her! Into her astonished ears they pour their marvellous tale, and find at last that she has *nothing* to say. There is deep satisfaction to be derived from this discovery. She is speechless with astonishment and relief, and perhaps a little shame as she remembers many small remarks made of, and to, Brabazon. But Brabazon himself has soared above all petty memories, and treats her with a brotherly kindness that adds another twinge to her remorse. In this gloriously subdued state they carry her off in triumph to the house.

Her seat beside Doris being thus vacated, Clontarf slips into it, and addresses his wife somewhat anxiously.

"I have just been speaking to Gerald," he says. "He is looking very—very unsettled, poor old fellow. I was hesitating as to whether I should or should not say anything to him about this unfortunate affair of Vera's, when he came straight to the point himself.

"'Is it true what I hear?" he said, laying his hand upon my arm: he was looking horribly white, almost ghastly, and I give you my word I can feel his grasp even now.

"'About what?' I stammered, rather meanly, pretending to misunderstand him.

"'You know!' he said. 'Is she going to marry Sir Watkyn?' There was not a tremor in his voice, yet it made me feel unaccountably nervous.

"'My dear fellow,' I said, 'what can it matter to you whom she may chance to marry, as she will not marry you? I'm awfully sorry about this whole business.' I was going to say a good deal more to him, when he stopped me abruptly, and with a gesture waved aside my attempted consolation.

"'*Answer* me,' he said, fiercely. 'Has she promised herself to that old man?'

"I thought it better then to confess the truth, as he had evidently heard it from somebody else; and what good could come of concealing it?

"'Whoever has told you about it,' I replied, 'has told you only the truth: I regret it almost as much as you can.'

"'Give me a proof,' he persisted. Still thinking it best

to be entirely candid with him, I said Vera had confessed to you this morning her engagement to Sir Watkyn.

"'And when was this engagement made?' he asked. 'Was it last night?'

"'Yes, last night,' I answered him, very reluctantly.

"'Late in the evening, or early?'

"'Directly after supper.'

"At that he burst out laughing: a terrible laugh, that made my blood run cold, shook his whole frame.

"'Well, you have only told me what I already knew,' he said, when his miserable mirth had died away. 'Thank you for your candor: it was kindest, and best. And now —good-by!'

"'Look here, Burke,' I said,—there was something in his face that made me uneasy,—'don't go away to-day. You aren't fit to travel. To-morrow will do you just as well, and—and you needn't see *her* unless you like. Don't say good-by just yet.'

"'It must be now, or not at all,' he said, with determination. 'I shall never say good-by to you again. You have heard,' here he smiled in a curious slow fashion that puzzled me, 'of eternal farewells: this is one of them. I am looking my last upon you now.'

"I could see he was determined to go, so refrained from any further attempts to detain him. I'm afraid he really intends to cut this part of the country at once and forever. His affection for Vera must be very deeply rooted."

"Too deeply," says Doris, who is almost in tears. "Poor fellow! It is really terrible! Oh, how can she prefer that toothless old man?"

"Money hath charms," says Clontarf, sententiously.

"But Gerald has money, too, a very liberal fortune, and she has a dowry of her own. I'm afraid it was the title." She colors and looks down guiltily as she says this. Who is *she*, that she should condemn her sister on this count?

"It doesn't matter what it was," says Clontarf, hastily: "the mischief now is done. I felt awfully sorry for Burke, but what could I do? I could only wring his hand and wish him speedy forgetfulness."

"Where is he now?" asks Doris, anxiously.

"In his own room. I thought I'd come and tell you about it, and advise you to keep Vera and Sir Watkyn well out of his way until the time comes for his departure,—and then too,—or very probably you will have a scene of one sort or another. That would be disagreeable, you know, and do no good. He looked dangerous, and we are all aware the dear fellow's temper, quiet as he appears, is not always under his control."

"Dear me! Sir Watkyn would be but a fly in his grasp,"

says Doris, rising nervously. "And I wonder where Vera is: I have not seen her for some time."

"She was here with us when Mrs. Desmond came," says Donat, looking vaguely round him. "Perhaps she went for a walk somewhere."

"Perhaps so. I hope so. But I wish I was sure."

"Well, I suppose we should have seen her if she went back to the house. As long as she stays out here she is safe from recrimination, as I am sure poor Burke will not venture among us again, he is in such unmistakably low spirits."

"Still, I am uneasy," says Doris. "She may have gone in-doors, you know, and a scene, as you say, is always to be avoided. I think I shall try to find her, and give her timely warning of what she may expect if she lets herself come face to face with that poor Gerald. If you see her out here, say a word to her, too."

"Certainly I shall," answers Clontarf.

Doris, turning away, moves towards the balcony steps. Dicky Browne, seeing her go, joins her.

"Every one is deserting us," he says. "Where is Miss Costello? where is Kit? where is Mrs. Desmond? where, oh! where is our 'mechanized automaton'?"

"Sir Watkyn? I don't know. I haven't seen him today."

"Perhaps we shan't ever see him again," says Mr. Browne, hopefully. "Perhaps he has gracefully and thoughtfully faded into nothingness since he had the honor of performing that amazing quadrille last night with Miss Costello! By the bye, where is *she?*"

"Come, let us look for her," returns Doris, smiling.

Monica, Kit, and Neil have already disappeared within the house; Clontarf and Brian Desmond are left alone.

"Have a game of tennis?" asks Clontarf, yawning vigorously. "It may rouse us up a bit. Bet you half a sovereign I beat you two games out of three."

"Come on," replies Brian, rising lazily. "What's become of everybody? Like a flash they vanished."

"Gone in a body to look for Vera, I think," says Clontarf, indifferently. "Doris wants her."

But, though Doris searches diligently for her up and down the house, Vera is nowhere to be found.

* * * * * * * * *

Whilst they had all been talking together ten minutes ago, she had slipped away from them, and is now (even while they are searching for her) wandering listlessly through the shrubberies. She is out of sight and hearing, and is trailing her little white gown over the grasses, lilting some sentimental old-world song as she goes.

Past the garden where Kit and Brabazon were but now, she wanders across the green-sward, still soft with the showers of early morn, and down into the far-off lonely pleasaunce, walled in by tall yew hedges cut in fantastic shapes, where stands the dripping fountain.

All here is as still, as silent, as it was last night, when *he* and she stood here alone, with the pale moon shining overhead.

Again she seats herself upon the rim of the marble basin, again she lets her slender fingers run lightly through the rippling water. No girlish regret for that sad scene of last night has led her here to-day, no vague sense of remorse. Nothing but the fate that we call chance has directed her idle footsteps to the spot where she and Burke had parted.

Now, indeed, as she looks around her, still humming her pretty air, memory compels her to recall what happened here only a few short hours ago; and as she makes quaint figures in the water with her hand, Gerald's white miserable face rises up before her, and word by word all that he said to her, all that she said to him, returns to her.

"What a silly thing this affair with Gerald has been from beginning to end!" she says to herself, presently, with an impatient shrug. "*More* than silly,—positively dangerous. I can't bear earnest people. Well, it is all over now, and I shall be careful in the future to avoid a second imbroglio of the kind."

Foolish in the extreme, she tells herself it was,—that flirtation,—and yet at times amusing, too! A merry, mischievous, irrepressible smile parts her lips, as some inward recollections of certain scenes and situations come to her. She is still smiling over them, and ruffling the water daintily with her fingers, when a shadow falling athwart her makes her raise her eyes.

As she does so, the color recedes a little from her cheek and brow. She is face to face once more with Gerald Burke!

CHAPTER XXXVI.

"For out of doubt,
Thou hast me wounded in mine heart?"

"O sudden haps! O thou fortune unstable!"

"Alas! mine heartës queen!"

"You see, I could not go without a last word," he says, slowly, regarding her with a settled gaze that disconcerts her for the moment. Then she recovers herself, and looks at him with smiling eyes.

"I thought you would not," she says, sweetly; "and yet—is it wise?"

"It is too late for wisdom."

"But your promise to me?" she murmurs, with tenderest reproach. "To leave me for a year! And now you will miss your train perhaps, unless indeed you make great haste."

"And *your* promise, to grant me whatever I may choose to ask of you when the year is out? What of that? Does that still hold good? I could not go until you had assured me of it again."

"Could you not trust me so far? and now—now you *are* assured, will you not go? Your train—you will lose it."

"Yes, I shall lose it." He seats himself upon the marble basin of the fountain close to her, and, taking her hand from the water,—that is now scarcely so cold as it,—lays it gently upon his own palm.

"Such a soft little hand," he says, musingly, "should belong to a guileless heart,—such as yours."

"But why have you so suddenly changed your mind?" she asks, with just the faintest touch of impatience. He scarcely seems to hear her. Good heavens! if he should stay on and learn the truth!

"Cold hand, warm heart," he says. "Yours should be warm, your fingers are so chilly."

"The water has chilled them. But do you not hear me, Gerald? Have you forgotten all we said here last night?"

"I think so. I can hardly recall it now. I thought we spoke of love, and hope, and trust, and—but *you* remember!"

"Yes, yes. You have not forgotten, surely, what we agreed upon,—that you should go,—should leave me for a little while; and yet here you are lingering."

"Let us both rest a little," he says, in a strange voice. "We shall be gone soon enough." Then, rousing himself by an apparent effort, he bends his dark eyes upon her. "Well, and so it is arranged that when I return to you in a year, you will marry me?"

"Why must you ask me that so often?"

"Because the asking is so sweet, only a little less sweet than the answer you will give. In a year—a little year—you will be my wife! Is that not so? Speak! To hear you say it will give me courage."

For a moment she hesitates.

"What! is the saying of it so difficult to you?" he exclaims, with a peculiar smile. "I should not have thought that. Come, say the 'yes,' if only to please a poor wretch so soon to be cast adrift upon an unknown world."

"Unknown!" she shrinks from him, a swift change in his manner causing her some vague disturbance. "Why, where are you going?"

"Oh, who can be sure of that?" returns he, with a light laugh that has no mirth in it. "And now give me my answer: when I return, I shall find you waiting for me?"

Again she hesitates; then "Yes," she says, telling her lie with a soft smile, betraying him with a glance as open, as innocent, as a child's.

At this his hand tightens upon hers, and he comes a little closer to her. He has never once removed his eyes from her face, and now his glance seems almost to burn into her soul. A dead silence follows on her words. Their very breathing is audible in the terrible hush that seems to have fallen on the day,—the hour!

Vera moves uneasily. She would have given half her life, almost, to be able to rise and escape from this deadly quiet pleasaunce, that seems cut off forever from a smiling world beyond,—to cry aloud, to laugh, to sing, to claim noisy comradeship with Nature; but some fascination forbids her.

Then all at once he removes his eyes from hers, and thrusts his right hand into his breast. Still keeping it there, he looks back at her again, always holding her hand, and says, in a calm, clear voice,—

"And so—you think you are going to marry that old man?"

No surprised exclamation escapes her lips, but she grows very white, and a gleam of defiance lights her eyes.

"So you have heard! you know!" she says, in a low tone. "And yet you have come here, pretending ignorance, to compel me to falsehood."

"To *compel* you? An easy task!" returns he, with a bitter sneer.

"Well, now you know the worst," says Vera, recklessly; "and, after all, I am glad of it."

"So am I. You tell me, then,—let me make no mistake,—you tell me with your own lips, that of your own free will, without coercion of any sort, you have elected to marry Sir Watkyn Wylde?"

His tone as he asks this is so unnaturally calm that it should have warned her; but, alas! one requires a heart in one's own body to be able to read correctly the hearts of others.

"Yes, it is all quite true," she answers, decisively. She does not stammer in the saying of it, or blush violently; only the very faintest, sweetest tinge of crimson dyes her cheek.

"I swore to you once," says Burke, quietly, "that if ever you decided on marrying any man but me I should kill you. You remember?"

"Distinctly; but, you see, you can't drown me *to-day:* the fountain isn't deep enough," says Vera, saucily. All her usual spirits have returned to her. She is no longer disconcerted or dismayed. So gay, so full of life she seems, so pretty is her defiance, that for the instant he feels something akin to sorrow for her.

"Cannot even fear touch you?" he says.

"Fear of what?" she asks, opening her lovely eyes. "Of *you?* Do you know, you remind me of something—a book—or, no, a ridiculous play—I once saw in town? In it a girl is supposed to break a man's heart, or to behave falsely to him in some way, and—he—murders her! It was a silly thing to do, I thought, as I watched it."

"What was silly?—to break a man's heart?"

"No!" Here she laughs, showing all her pretty white teeth. "That is nothing; and people's hearts don't break, except on the stage. It was the killing that was so unwise. It was so unpleasant for *him*—afterwards!"

"There will be no afterwards," murmurs Burke, dreamily, but so low that she only barely catches the sound of one of his words.

"Yes, there was," she says, gayly. "He was taken up and hanged. It was a disagreeable ending to a rather interesting plot, and I was really sorry when——"

Something in Burke's face checks her. The remainder of her sentence dies away on her lips. That he has ceased to listen to her is apparent. He is looking perfectly ghastly, and his large dark eyes, lit by a brilliant fire from within, have a strange far-off look in them, unearthly and unreal. The sudden stoppage of her voice recalls him to himself.

"Of what are you thinking?" asks Vera, suddenly, and somewhat curiously.

"Of my oath," returns he, slowly.

"Like Shylock?" exclaims she, carelessly. "The part doesn't suit you! Have you too, like him, an 'oath in heaven'?"

"Or in hell, perchance!" Then he leans towards her. "You know of mine!" he says, hoarsely. "Be warned. Take pity on yourself while yet there is time. Give up this mad scheme of yours."

"About Sir Watkyn?"

"Yes. You shall never marry him."

"No?" lightly. "But indeed I shall."

"Never."

"We shall see."

"We shall." Again his hand seeks his breast, inside his coat, and lingers there. "Think," he says. "Will *nothing* turn you from your purpose?"

"Nothing!" She defies him still,—daintily, with laughing lips and head upheld. He is absolutely livid; *her* color is warm and ripe and rich as the heart of a rose.

"Think once again,—for the last time," he entreats her, speaking with difficulty, with such painful rapidity is his breath coming and going. "What is this old man to you, that you should risk—— What is it you hope to gain by such a marriage? Money?"

"Well," she says, shrugging her shoulders, "I will not disguise it from you, money has always had its charm for me. Like charity, it covers a multitude of sins. For sins, read years, in this case," she adds, with a little fantastic grimace.

"But I am not a poor man. Not so rich as he is, certainly, but still I have enough surely for all your needs."

"Who shall say what my needs may be?" returns she, lightly.

"Tell me," he says, coming closer to her, and looking with haggard eyes into hers, "did you *ever* mean to marry me? Was there ever a moment in all these past, bitterly sweet months when you said to yourself that it was even barely possible you might some day be my wife?"

"Why ask all these useless questions now?" returns she, evasively.

"If they are useless, so much the worse for us both. Answer me."

"To what end?"

"*Answer* me!"

"Well, then,—never!" she says, with a frown and an impatient gesture.

"You were simply playing with me?—finding your pastime in my many griefs, my few joys!—smiling in secret over each fresh pang, that proved to you how complete

was the victory you had gained over your victim! And I—*I*—believed—as in the heaven above us—in each simple (*seemingly* simple) word that fell from your lips, dwelt with passionate tenderness upon each false kindly smile, and walked in cruel agony of mind and self-abasement the long night through, when I thought some chance word of mine, born of jealous love during the preceding day, had caused you a moment's pain! Oh"—throwing up his hand towards the blue and matchless sky above—"that such things should be! That one should be born, and a heart given him by the Creator, to be so tortured and so foully dealt with!"

Vera has stepped back from him. She has, indeed, listened to him all through with a certain amount of gentle reluctance. This is doubtless one of his tiresome days!—certainly the most tiresome she has ever known! Good gracious! if one is to be talked at, and scolded, and generally abused for such a little trifling misdemeanor as hers, nobody is safe! How ridiculous he is with his heroics!—yet they become him, too. Glancing at him with calmly critical eyes, even at this supreme moment (which she fails to understand) she decides that emotion suits him, and that in his present attitude he is looking remarkably handsome. "Pity he doesn't get himself painted in character," she says to herself, musingly: "with his hand elevated like that, he looks like—— Ah! now he has lowered it! I wish he hadn't; but I suppose he could put it up again just like that, if one asked him."

"Why don't you speak?" he breaks in now, vehemently. "Have you no fear? Is your soul so dead that even such a common animal instinct is dulled within you? Will you deny *nothing?* Is all that I have said quite true? Have you indeed been wittingly befooling me with soft words and softer looks since first we met?"

"Fie! what an ugly word that is!" she says, smiling. "'Befooling;' no, I will not listen to it. Think of some other before you ask me the question again."

The passionate—the desperate—hope of a denial, that had even at this late hour sustained him, now dies forever. He looks at her. She has torn some wild flowers from their home, and is idly knotting them into a little wreath. In song, in history, on canvas, was there ever a woman's form so replete as hers with youthful innocence, and sweetness unalloyed, and happy childish trust?

"I shall never ask you a question again," he says, in a tone so low as to be almost a whisper. "The time has gone by for that! Time, indeed, has almost ceased for—us! And yet"—drawing himself up to his full height, and speaking with a wild vehemence—"I will give you one

last chance. Vera! *Vera!* Think of your youth, your long, long life that may yet lie before you, and swear to me you will break this unnatural——"

"Nonsense!" she says, interrupting him with a swift motion of her hand and a touch of delicate scorn in her soft voice. "Do not let us go over it all again. I tell you my mind is made up—and—I never alter it! Sir Watkyn will suit me admirably; you,—forgive me,—with your scenes and your intensity, would bore me to death. Let us understand the real truth as it is. *You* have made a mistake. *I* am going to marry Sir Watkyn! Another mistake, according to your lights. So be it. Let us say we are both the victims of huge mistakes."

"You shall not marry him!" says Burke, between his teeth.

"Oh, yes, I shall," with a low laugh. "Who can prevent me?"

"*I can!*"

At this, she looks deliberately into his face and smiles, and, as though daring him to do his worst, swings her wild-flower wreath (now half entwined) lightly to and fro before him, as though in mocking scorn of his ability to check or sway her.

Even as she thus stands smiling defiantly at him, in the wilful insolence and pride of her beautiful youth, he draws his hand—so long concealed—from his breast. There is a sharp report, a faint cloud upon the ambient air, and then—with the soft mocking smile still upon her lips—she falls forward without a groan, a struggle, into his arms,—*dead!*

No faintest cry has broken from her, no last eager grasp at departing life has distorted her form; a gentle shudder, a little convulsive twitching of her hand, that was all! and now she lies motionless upon his breast,—lifeless—dead! shot through the heart!

Gently—very gently—he lays her down upon the swaying grass, and, kneeling beside her, looks upon his work. There is, as it seems to him, the faintest flicker of her eyelids,—the last sad farewell of rich young life to the world that but a moment since was all in all to it,—a flicker so faint as to make him uncertain whether it indeed was ever there, or whether fond fancy only had not tricked him into the belief in it.

The smile is still upon her red, red lips; their rosy freshness has not as yet deserted them. One little hand, nerveless and open-palmed, falls across his arm as he places her tenderly upon the ground; almost she seems as one that sleepeth and is smiling in some happy dream.

Bending over her, he presses his lips softly, solemnly, to hers.

"My love! my darling!" he murmurs, in a very frenzy of adoration, addressing her as one might a beloved living object, not one now, alas! swiftly growing cold in death. Not a touch of regret for what he has done darkens his face; rather there is on it the light of a great triumph that brightens it and makes it glad.

He kisses her hands, her brow, her cheek (how chill it grows already!), and then her lips again. Lastly, he caresses with lightest touch—as though he fears awakening her—the soft little yellow tangles of her curly hair. Alas! alas! how fair it was, that pretty golden hair!

"Dear little head," he says, with tender rapture; then very sadly, "and now how low it lies! O love! why would you have it so?"

With a strange wistfulness he regards her, and then with loving fingers closes her poor eyes upon a world she can no longer see. He folds her arms across her bosom, and so arranges her that she now lies picturesquely beautiful, as a little statue might,—cold and still, but without blot or blemish.

"She will like to look pretty when they find her," he says, not so much sadly as fondly; there is no grief in the eyes he bends upon her, no contrition, but always a love, deep, unutterable.

Then suddenly he springs to his feet, and, raising his eyes, looks all around him,—at the dawning glory of the now awakening summer that lies on leaf and grass, upon the blue and sunny sky in the great vault above, upon the glimpse of the gleaming ocean, lying far away down there in the bay.

He sighs! He draws a long, long breath; and then again his eyes seek her,—the slender, graceful, pathetically silent figure at his feet. How mute, how horribly quiet, she lies now,—she who but a moment since stood before him a little laughing, happy thing, thoughtless of life and death!

Is she dead? She is so calm, so peaceful in her last rest, that the doubt arises; he bends over her—closer——

Oh! cruel life-blood! Her very heart's blood! Slowly, slowly it is creeping, stealing from her, dyeing the pretty white gown she had worn so gayly but a short, short hour agone, when chanting her quaint little song over garden and lawn. With fatal swiftness the tiny crimson stream flows from her, sullying in its journey the half-finished wild-flower wreath she had meant to finish, if time (that is now no more for her) had not been so piteously denied her.

A shudder runs through his frame. He recoils, yet still gazes, as one fascinated, upon the ghastly sight. Through the flowers, and over the dead child-like hand, the blood is

flowing, and is now falling with a slow drip, drip, upon the young green grass.

"Vera, Vera! Forgive me! *Wait* for me! I am coming to you!" he cries, incoherently.

Then he raises his hand to his mouth: there is a second sharp report. He staggers,—falls.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

"This was a piteous talē for to hear."

"God wot that worldly joy is soon y-go."

"Her beauty was her death I dare well sayn
Alas! so piteously as she was slain!"

CLONTARF, for the first time, misses his ball disgracefully.

"Who is that firing?" he says to Brian, looking at him in a startled fashion across the net.

"That's the second shot," says Brian, looking uneasy in his turn. Yet why are they uneasy? How often have they practised firing at targets! And yet now they are dismayed by the mere sound of a revolver. It is the divine instinct within them, that we all have in common with the lower classes of animals, that warns them vaguely of the fell misfortune that fills the air they breathe.

"Dicky, I suppose," returns Clontarf: "he is never happy unless he is making a noise."

"Dicky, no doubt," says Brian; yet with one accord they lay down their rackets, and move towards the direction from which the ominous sounds have come.

"Let us see what he is at," says Donat, as carelessly as he can, but his tone is not careless, and in his heart there is an unaccountable misgiving.

They have crossed the lawn and the smaller garden, and are now walking rapidly by the tall yew hedge I have before described as being cut into fantastic shapes. They are on the garden side of it; on the other side, within five feet of them, lie those two awful, silent bodies!—silent forever, until that great day when even the sea must give up its dead, and all shall stand before the throne!

Yet out of all Nature there arises no voice to cry aloud to them of this terrible thing to which they are drawing nigh. It is but to turn the corner at the lower end of the impenetrable hedge, and then all will lie with cruel clearness be-

fore them; and still no kindly warning is sent to lessen the horror of it.

The world seems glad and full of joyous life; the birds are twittering merrily on every branch, no subtile suggestion of sorrow damps the warmth of the sweet summer day. A thrush, standing on a bough above their heads, opens its mouth suddenly and flings upon the passing breeze a song so full of jubilation and wild, irrepressible joy that instinctively they pause, and raise their heads to listen to it.

Only a paltry hour ago, a voice as sweet was ringing through hall and corridor and over lawns and grassy slopes.

Clontarf and Brian are still hesitating in the pathway, uncertain where to go, when the whining of a little dog that has followed them (a favorite of Vera's) attracts their attention.

The tiny creature is crying and sniffing curiously at *something* that, unknown to him, is almost at Donat's feet. And now it begins to moan piteously, and tear in an impotent fashion at the hedge, as though it would force a passage through it.

Looking downward, Donat catches sight of the "something"—the awful sluggish thing—that creeps ever nearer and nearer to him over the pebbles that line the path.

"*What is that?*" he cries, in a fearful tone, starting backwards. He lays his hand on Brian's arm, and points vehemently towards the ground.

A moment later, and they have turned the corner of the yew hedge, and are gazing upon——

Burke is stretched face downward, all his limbs betraying that terrible laxity that belongs alone to the dead. One arm is flung wide, the other lies beneath him. There is a majesty about him that no sense of crime can destroy, that no helplessness on his part can lessen.

Vera is lying a little way from him. Not so far, however, but that his outstretched hand has fallen upon and grasped a fold of her gown. So, in death as in life, he has clung to her!—She is lying in the peaceful attitude of one who sleeps, and upon her face is a tranquillity indescribable. Her lips are slightly parted; upon them is a smile beautiful, but awful!

"Desmond! Desmond!" cries Clontarf.

He falls upon his knees beside her, and takes one of her hands between his own. Already it has grown cold and stiff. "She *cannot* be dead!" he cries, in a frenzied tone. "Brian, help me! do something for her."

In truth, he hardly knows what he is saying.

Brian, stooping over her, would have laid his hand upon

her heart, but the crimson stain that mars the whiteness of her gown checks him. All that side of her dress is damp and red with her life's blood.

"She is dead!" he says, faintly. He shudders, and shrinks back from her.

"She is not!" exclaims Clontarf, fiercely. Then, as though forgetful of his angry assertion,—almost, indeed, as it passes his lips,—his tone changes. "What a tragedy!" he whispers, hoarsely. "What an ending! Oh, poor child! poor little thing!" Covering his face with his hands, he bursts into tears.

Again silence falls upon the fatal scene. Again the rushing of the distant streamlet can be heard, and, mingling with it, the voices of many birds.

Something else too, mingles, with it!—something that strikes cold to the hearts of the two awe-stricken listeners. It is the sound of a woman's voice, a clear, soft, musical voice, singing gayly some airy graceful thing from "Iolanthe." There is a touch of deliciously careless enjoyment in the singer that sounds like profanation to the two on the other side of the hedge who are gazing upon death in its cruellest form.

"It is Doris!" cries Clontarf, starting as if struck. "She must not come here."

"No, no. Go to her," says Brian, hurriedly, "and—and send some one here—*quickly*. Send Dicky. I shall wait until he comes, but do not leave me too long! Be quick, Clontarf! If she turns the corner all is lost."

For the last time (until she is lying in her coffin) Clontarf looks at the poor dead girl, with her hands crossed so meekly on her bosom, and her little unfinished wreath (that tells its own tale of a life brought untimely to an end) still clasped in her icy fingers.

She is beyond them all now,—beyond their love and their sorrow and their censure. She has gone from them

To the soft long sleep, to the broad, sweet bosom of death,

and no tears and lamentations, however keen and heartfelt, can bring back even one farewell glance to those closed eyes, or one last smile to those marble lips.

The careless, happy voice is coming nearer and nearer.

"This will kill her!" says Clontarf; then he goes round the yew hedge once more, and, coming face to face with his wife, stops short.

She stops too. The song has died upon her lips. She is staring at him in a very panic of vague, ignorant fear. His face has betrayed him.

"What is it?" she asks, in a low, breathless voice.

Then her eyes dilate, and a gray hue overspreads her face. She recoils from him, and points with a frantic gesture towards his hand.

"What is that?" she cries, hoarsely. "That—THAT!"

It is a large spot of half-congealed blood that has fallen upon him. As for the first time he becomes aware of it, a violent shudder shakes his frame, and he makes a futile effort to shake it off.

"Do not say it!" says Lady Clontarf, in a voice of horror, raising her hands to her head. "It is not Vera. *Any one* else! but not——"

"She has been hurt," says Clontarf. "She——" He goes quickly up to her and catches her in his arms.

"She is dead!" exclaims she, with a terrible cry. "Speak, SPEAK, I tell you. Why don't you answer me?"

"What can I say?" groans Clontarf, in an agonized voice. "What remains to be told?"

"Ah!" A heavy sigh escapes her. She sways helplessly forward, and Clontarf, taking her insensible body in his arms, carries her tenderly into the house.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

"Mine heart is brost for pity of this maid."

"Is there no grace? Is there no remedy?"

A FEW sad days have passed away,—not more than four or five in all, yet what an eternity they have seemed to the stricken mourners! What ages appear to have come and gone since last that merry voice sounded in hall and corridor! Can it indeed be only yesterday that she was buried? Everything is crushed backwards, and viewed dimly, as though years have sprung up between the then and now!

"Yet can I not persuade me thou art dead,
Or that thy beauties lie in wormy bed,
Hid from the world in a low-delvëd tomb."

Yesterday morning very early, both were laid in their last sad homes. From different houses to different churchyards they had been carried, being thus as dissevered in death as they were in life!

During that first paralyzing hour in which the evil news had become known, they had hesitated, in a confusion mingled with fear, about what was to be done with *his*

dead body. There had been a vague, nervously-expressed idea that it should be brought (at least for the present) into some room at Kilmalooda, and, indeed, as far as the hall it *had* been brought by the frightened servants. But Doris, hearing of it, as she knelt in stony grief beside all that was left to her of her sister, had risen up, and in wild and frantic terms had denounced those who had brought him beneath the roof where lay his victim, and had with passionate words refused his corpse house-room. So violent was her emotion—shaking as it did all her slender, lissome figure—that Clontarf made hurried arrangements by which the body of the unhappy man in the hall was conveyed to his own home, many miles distant.

From that moment Doris had shown no active feeling of any sort. She had neither spoken nor cried, and had turned with a cold dislike from all attempts at consolation. She had sat in her room with her hands clasped idly before her, gazing into vacancy, and thinking such despairing thoughts, doubtless, as I pray few of us may know. Vera had been the one thing that loved her in all her solitary life, the one thing she had clung to in spite of the girl's faults and shallow nature; and now, finding herself bereft of her, she dwells with fatal persistency upon the cruel manner in which the tie between them has been severed. There had been no sad, fond, parting words to soothe her, —no farewell kiss,—no last tender, if sorrowful, recollections. All is horror, fear, and unspeakable, sickening dismay.

Sometimes she would rise, and with rapid footsteps pace from bedroom to dressing-room, and from that to the boudoir beyond, and so back again, thinking always on the one terrible subject, seeing always that little fair dead form as it lay upon the bed when first brought in, and ever picturing to herself with cruel vividness that last awful scene by the fountain.

Sleeping or waking, Vera's face is always before her,—not arch and smiling as it was in life, but pale and cold and fixed, with that unearthly beauty on it that death alone can give; and, oh! so young!

> "O fairest flower, no sooner blown than blasted!
> Soft silken primrose fading timelessly!"

Just as she stood upon the threshold of her life a murderous hand had laid her in the dust!

They have all done what they could to rouse her from her dangerous silence; but she has shown herself uneasy in their presence and glad of their departure, and, with an obstinacy not to be accounted for, has positively declined to see Clontarf at all, shrinking from even the bare mention

of his name; whether because he had been the first to tell her the sad tidings, or from some private deeper feeling, no one can say; though all incline to the first belief.

Monica, indeed, she had consented to see twice; but no good had arisen out of these interviews. Doris had sat like one dumb all through her visits, hardly noticing the tears and tender caressings pitifully showered upon her by her friend, and had appeared unfeignedly relieved each time she had taken her leave.

"But, dear me! dear me! all this is most irregular," says the marquis, reproachfully, tapping the back of his right hand with his eye-glass. It is, as I have said, the day after the funeral, and nearly all our friends are assembled in the library at Kilmalooda. "Something must be done, you know, to—er—break this unreasonable calm—eh?"

"It is really dreadful to see her," murmurs Monica, tearfully, who has evidently been crying. "One hardly knows *what* to do. But she should be roused at all hazards. Her brain will not stand much more of this determined self-communing. If she could be made to give way to emotion, all might be well; but to see her sitting there day after day, pale, motionless, speechless,—oh! it breaks one's heart!"

"Not at all, not at all, my dear Mrs. Desmond. I beg you will not let anything injure that excellent organ of yours," says the marquis, earnestly. "The thing to *break* is this troublesome reserve that seems to have enveloped her."

"It has absolutely conquered her," says Kit. "It must be broken down."

"But how?" asks Brian. "We have all tried; we have all appealed to her,—in vain."

"All but Lord Clontarf," murmurs Monica, in a low tone. The marquis hears her.

"Donat!—where is Donat?" he asks, looking round for his son, with all the appearance of one suddenly inspired.

"What wild vagary has the man got into his head now?" mutters Mrs. Costello from her corner, with a malevolent glance at the unconscious marquis. Grief (and in her own way she has grieved for her little dead niece very sincerely) has been powerless to subdue the rancor that swells her martial breast each time her glance falls on her unoffending foe.

"I am here," answers Clontarf, coming out from behind the hanging curtains of the window, as his father calls for him. He has been silent hitherto, gazing with gloomy unseeing eyes upon the dying sunset without.

He is looking worn and dispirited. The late sad event, and his wife's openly-expressed disinclination to see him, have weighed heavily upon his heart.

"My dear fellow, come nearer," says the marquis, affectionately: "we want you. Everything now depends upon *you*,—the welfare of that sweet creature up-stairs, the relief of our natural anxiety,—in fact, as I have already said, everything?"

"If you are depending upon me to restore hope and comfort to Doris," returns Clontarf, with a quick flush, "you are leaning on a broken reed. She will not see me."

"The commonest thing in the world," says the marquis, airily. "We always, in the earlier moments of overpowering grief, shrink from the unfortunate person upon whom cruel Fate has laid the odious task of being the first to impart unwelcome news. And I have further noticed," continues the marquis, growing every instant more and more airy, "that, if that unfortunate person happens to be the one we love best on earth, our natural shrinking from him, or her, is redoubled."

To this remarkable experience of the marquis nobody says anything, except Mrs. Costello. But *she* is a host in herself!

"Ugh!" she says, with a noble scorn, and the snort of a war-horse.

"Now, my dear Donat, tell us what is to be done," continues Lord Dundeady, wisely declining to hear her.

"I don't know," returns Clontarf, steadily, his eyes on the ground.

"May I beg," says the marquis, with a shudder full of reproof, "that you will not give yourself the habit of uttering that silliest of all speeches? It is unworthy of you, Donat; it is indeed! And it casts a slur upon *me*, who I trust have done my duty by you on all occasions. You should *always* know; you *do* always know, if you will only give yourself the trouble to think about it."

"You overrate my powers," says Donat, wearily. "I do *not* know; I am at my wit's end."

"Ha! Well, I am not," says his father, cheerfully. "In an emergency such as this, I am happy to say, I know exactly what to do. A similar case was satisfactorily disposed of by me long years ago."

"Dear marquis, you give me hope," says Monica, with reviving interest.

"Your sweet mother, my dear Donat," goes on the marquis, when he has patted Monica's hand with friendly grace, "was excessively unhappy and quite prostrated with misery after we had been married some two or three months."

"I don't doubt it," interrupts Mrs. Costello, with a triumphant growl. "Eh! but who'd have thought we'd

ever hear the truth from his lips? However, *weeks*, not months, would have been nearer it."

"You were saying—I beg your pardon—I didn't quite catch it," says the marquis, turning to her with the utmost *bonhomie*. Her voice has reached him, not her words.

"Beg away; you will never get that, or anything else, out of *me!*" returns this terrible old woman, with startling promptitude. She brings her stick down with a thump upon the floor. "Pardon, indeed!" cries she. "Go on with your story, man, and don't mind me."

"Ah! quite so; certainly," says the marquis, with haste, indeed, but with undiminished politeness. "Your poor dear mother, as I was saying, Donat, met with a severe loss shortly after our marriage, and fell into a state of obstinate grief. She would not listen to reason. She would not be consoled."

"Was it her sister, too?" asks Monica, pathetically.

"No, my dear Mrs. Desmond. No. It was—er—in fact, it was her—er—kitten."

Profound sensation! Politely-suppressed amazement on the part of the Coole party. Openly-expressed scorn, as demonstrated by prolonged sniffs, on the part of Mrs. Costello.

"The most beautiful kitten, my dear Mrs. Desmond, I assure you; pure Persian! Your sweet mother was only then seventeen, Donat, and we used to think she and the kitten bore a strong resemblance to each other in many ways."

At this, Dicky Browne's behavior, which up to the present moment has been perfect, breaks completely down. He stoops towards Mrs. Costello. "Poor Donat! Did you hear that?" he asks, pitifully. "His mother had a face *like a Persian cat!*"

"Get along with you!" exclaims Mrs. Costello, fiercely, making a witch-like poke at him with her gold-headed stick.

"Yes,—yes,—the kitten came to an untimely end," the marquis is saying, "whereupon my poor wife shut herself up in her room and refused to be comforted. She would see no one. Exactly similar case, my dear Mrs. Desmond, to the sad one above. Well, I had been out all that day, or the catastrophe might have been averted. I got home at nightfall and heard all details. I asked to see her. She refused to see any one. I insisted (through the keyhole); she returned no answer. She was sunk in grief. I declined, however, to accept defeat. I made one more effort: I rattled at the handle of her room with all my might and main. The noise was irritating to the last degree. It *nearly* overcame me. It *quite* overcame her. She gave in

to the rattle. She opened her door. I entered. I pressed myself upon her notice, in spite of her settled determination to see nobody. The result was most gratifying,—in fact, all that could be desired. The instant she saw me, she gave way to wild despair. She burst into tears."

"I should think she did, poor soul!" says Mrs. Costello, with withering contempt. "Eh! But those weren't the first or the last tears, either, that your unwelcome presence caused her!"

"Yes? I didn't quite catch? Oh! Ah! exactly! As you say, dear Mrs. Costello, the tears were, of course, very beneficial,—very. We never heard a word about her misfortune afterwards," says the marquis, with a beaming smile.

"Lord Dundeady is right," says Monica, suddenly, who has picked up a grain of wisdom out of all this farrago of nonsense. "If by some means our poor Doris could be made to shed some heartfelt tears, all would be well."

"Who is to make her?" asks Kit.

"Donat!" returns the marquis, taking a pinch of snuff.

"Oh, no! Any one but me," says Clontarf, recoiling, and frowning heavily. A shadow falls upon his face,—a shadow full of poignant regret and passionate pain.

But the marquis cares for none of these things.

"Dear boy, you must string yourself up to it," he says, blandly. "*I* went to *my* wife and made her cry: *you* must go to *your* wife and reduce her to tears also. It is your positive duty. Horrid word, that, but—er—unavoidable. Go; and," with a burst of the most touching sentiment, "be tender with her,—*very* tender."

"Yes, and go at once," whispers Monica, pushing him nervously towards the hall. "Her door is open now. Do not ask permission to enter, do not give her the chance of refusing to see you. Go in boldly. The very start caused by your unexpected entrance may do her good,—poor darling! I am sure she is secretly longing for you all this sad time."

"Do go, Clontarf," says Brian.

"And hurry, old man, or perhaps by some ill luck she may close her door again," says Dicky Browne, kindly.

Thus pushed to the front, Clontarf accepts the situation, leaves the library, and goes slowly up-stairs to his wife's room, slowly, and hopelessly too, as one who knows his errand will be in vain.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

"What helpeth it to tarry forth the day,
To tellë how she wept both eve and morrow?"

"Alas the woe!"

SHE is sitting at a low table, with her arms folded upon it, and her face bent upon her arms, in a weary listless attitude. He has opened the door, and, standing on the threshold, is gazing with anxious hesitation at her drooping figure. But no faintest movement on her part betrays the fact that she is aware of his entrance.

Closing the door gently behind him, Clontarf advances to the table, and, seeing she still does not stir, lays his hand upon her shoulder. She shivers a little at his touch, and, slowly raising her head, looks up at him.

Such a haggard, tearless, miserable face meets his that it is by an effort alone he suppresses an exclamation. If before this he has been unconsciously harboring towards her any little spark of resentment, this one glance at her misery dispels it at once and forever.

"My poor, poor girl!" he says, with ineffable tenderness.

The vaguest suspicion of surprise creeps into her eyes for an instant. Then her head drops back upon her arms again, and a heavy sigh escapes her.

"Doris, at this moment I *implore* you not to turn from me," says Clontarf, with strongly-suppressed agitation. "I am here at a disadvantage, I know, against your expressed desire. This thought, believe me, was bitter to me, but you see I have overcome it. I entreat you to let me share your grief,—to let me be something to you."

No answer falls from her lips, but she moves her bent head uneasily from side to side.

"I know I can be of little good to you," goes on Clontarf, unsteadily. "Although I am your husband, I am the one of all others from whom you turn in your hour of need. Any one can better give you the comfort that I long to give,—yet cannot."

"No, no, you must not think that," murmurs she, at last, lifting her face, all pale and wan. "If any one could give me comfort, it might be—perhaps—you. But there is no comfort anywhere,—none!"

Again she hides her face.

"How can I believe you, when you yourself have been the one to forbid my presence here? I have learned to

think myself unwelcome to you! There is no reason" (with quick agitation) "why I should not believe myself *hateful* to you."

"Do not!" she says, in a stifled tone.

"How can I help it? How can I feel myself anything but an intruder on your grief,—your *terrible* grief,—that, if I might, I would so gladly share with you?"

There is entreaty in his tone, and anxious longing. Will she notice it?

She does not lift her head this time, but slowly, languidly, she changes her position, and steals one hand towards him over the shining walnut wood of the table. It has not very far to steal. Gladly, thankfully, he places his own upon it and takes it in possession.

Still holding it, he pushes a chair close to hers, and, seating himself beside her, encircles her with his arm and draws her to him with gentle authority of touch.

He watches her with some secret doubt and anxiety as he does this, but she shows no impatience, and there is even a look of relief on her tired face, as she turns it to him and lays it on his shoulder.

Glad in his heart at his success so far, Clontarf sits silent, wondering if she will speak to him, later on, of the one sad subject which engrosses her mind.

She stirs restlessly from time to time, and sighs mournfully, and then, at last,—

"I weary you," she says, wistfully. "You have been good to me; you have comforted me in some strange way, I don't know how; but it distresses me to think I am keeping you here in this dull room. You have stayed long enough. Go back to the others now. I cannot talk to you."

"Do not drive me away from you," says Clontarf, with earnest entreaty. "Let me stay until I myself wish to go; and," with sudden inspiration, "*try* to conquer this silence that is killing you. Try to talk to me of our cruel misfortune."

"Ah! Cruel!" The word seems to strike some answering echo in her brain. Eagerly she grasps at it, and, rising to her feet, stands back from him. She lifts her hands to her head in a confused fashion, and pushes back the loose hair behind her ears. A miserable excitement growing upon her lights a feverish fire within her large eyes.

"It is that," she cries, with a burst of nervous horror,—"the *cruelty* of it,—that is destroying me! One moment she was here, laughing in the happy sunshine—in another —*there*, cast into the unknown, lifeless, helpless, her young soul torn from her without a warning, without one short minute in which to think,—to pray,—to——"

She pauses abruptly, as if unable to proceed, and clasps her hands together. Her face has grown white as marble, but the feverish fire in her eyes still burns brightly. Clontarf, afraid to check her, listens anxiously for what next may come.

"Only one little quarter of an hour before she had stood by me in her white gown, her soft curls swaying in the wind, the air made sweeter by her merry laughter. I can see her now," cries Doris, in an agony of despair, "with her eyes so glad and blue, with her pretty teeth showing through her parted lips. And it was only that morning she had told me that *I* was the thing she held dearest upon earth. Her kiss seems still warm upon my lips; the touch of her little hand—I feel it now. She was my *all*,—the one creature that loved me; she——"

"Doris!" interrupts Clontarf, growing very pale; he would have gone to her, but she waves him back.

"Let me speak," she says, with passion. "I have been so long silent that now, when you have compelled me to break the bond that held me mute, I feel I *must* give way to the thoughts that have been torturing me all these long terrible days. Be patient with me: only hear me!"

"There is no need for patience. I am happy in the thought that you will *let* me hear you."

"I am thinking of the hour when they brought her in to me,—*brought* her,—she who had left me in all the glory and freshness of her youth. They carried her to her room,—gently, no doubt. They—they seemed sorry for her, I think. You"—uncertainly—"were one of them, were you not? but the roughest touch on earth could not have harmed her then. They laid her on her bed, and I went and stood beside her. I looked down upon her. I can see her now, again! How beautiful she was! how calm! how tranquil! Is she beautiful *now*, I wonder, down in the cold earth, down among——?"

A convulsive trembling seizes her frame.

"Break away from such morbid thoughts, *trample* them," exclaims Clontarf, shaking her arm sharply. "Why think of her as being *there*, when there is a heaven above us?"

"True! true!" she says, with a heavy sigh, and in a tone of inexpressible melancholy. She says it rather vacantly, and indeed her next words prove that her mind is still fastened upon that late mournful scene when the murdered girl had first been brought in-doors.

"Did you notice the smile upon her lips?" she asks. "I never saw any one dead before. Do they *all* smile like that? Oh, that solemn, sweet, horrible, changeless smile!—shall I ever forget it? And her pretty white gown, that an hour before was dainty as herself, was red—

red—with—— Ah! *no!*"—wildly,—"I will not recall *that* to mind either, or I shall go mad! Oh! her poor little hands—with the stain—the stain upon them! and her flowers, the wreath she was given no time to finish—it, too, was damp—and dyed——"

Again her voice fails her, and a violent shudder shakes her slender body. Her brows are contracted, her eyes full of anguish. These fatal recollections seem more than she can bear, they move her very soul within her.

"Alas! what can any one say to comfort you in such an hour as this?" says Clontarf, mournfully. "No words can bring back our dead, no tears may wash out our bitter memories. All I can tell you is that I suffer with you. There is at least one bond between us, Doris, divided though we be: I, too, loved her!"

He covers his face with his hands. His words, his action, touch her heart. Her eyes follow him. Surely he has felt her grief! A secret sympathy, sad, yet sweet, exists between them. All others have sorrowed *for* her; he has sorrowed *with* her. At this supreme moment they "share the inward fragrance of each other's heart."

An overwhelming flood of feeling sweeps over her. Her breath comes thick and fast. With an exceeding great and bitter cry, she throws her arms above her head and breaks into a paroxysm of tears. Kindly Nature, bursting at last through all barriers, saves her senses.

In an instant Clontarf has her in his arms. Carrying her to a couch, he lays her on it, and there, with his arms still round her, lets her weep out her storm of emotion on his breast.

At first he makes no effort to check this violent outburst of grief, thinking it well it should have its way; but presently he whispers tender soothing words to her, as he might to a sorrowful child, and after a little while, as she grows exhausted, the sobs grow fainter, fainter still. The tired and trembling figure grows heavier in his embrace, then all is quiet.

So quiet, that after a while, with a vague sense of alarm upon him, he stoops to look at the bent face. One glance shows him she has fallen into a deep, dreamless, merciful sleep.

With a lightened heart, and one filled with honest thankfulness, he lays her gently back among the pillows of the couch, and, throwing a light covering round her, prepares to watch over her while she sleeps. The change in her position does not waken her, nor does the sound of his footfall echoing through the room. Indeed, so thoroughly is she worn out by the severity of the mental strain that has been laid upon her for five interminable days, and

so weak is she through want of food and rest, that her sleep almost borders upon insensibility.

The hours go by, and still Clontarf sits motionless beside her. The daylight fades. Solemn twilight creeps up from the sea and over all the land. There is a hush and a stillness on the air that belong alone to coming night. It is the hour when soft buds fold themselves in slumber, when "all winds go sighing for sweet things dying," and saddest thoughts are uppermost.

Clontarf is fast sinking into the very gloomiest of reveries, when a gentle knock at the door recalls him to healthier thoughts.

Opening the door softly, he finds Monica standing on the threshold.

"Well?" she asks, nervously.

"She has fallen asleep," returns Clontarf, in a low voice. "The rest will do her good, I hope,—I trust."

"Shall I come and watch by her?"

"No. Thank you a thousand times, but—no. I shall not leave her again. I have done her some good, I think. She spoke to me of her own accord of—of—poor Vera, and then cried herself to sleep."

"Cried?"

"Yes, miserably,—bitterly."

"Ah! that *dear* marquis," says Monica, with subdued admiration. "He knew the right medicine, after all. But you will bear me out that I, too, recommended a dose of—of *you!* I said always she wanted you, and you only. I told them she would be happiest in the hands she loves best,—your hands."

If he winces beneath this kindly cruel touch, she does not perceive it in the dusk of the corridor.

"Where is Brian?" he asks, hurriedly.

"Down-stairs with Kit and Neil, who have driven up the ponies to carry me home. And now, before I go, is there any last thing I can do for you?—any later orders about dinner?"

"It is useless to even think about that. She will sleep, I hope, for the next two hours, and it is now almost seven. I shall not leave her, you know,"—simply,—"until she wakes; and not then, either."

"Nevertheless, you can't starve," says Mrs. Desmond, who is a very practical young woman. "I shall tell one of the men to have something nice ready to send up to you the moment you ring. And do try to make her eat it with you. She has had nothing for hours. And, now, good-night," holding out her hand to him with a friendly smile.

She has not gone many steps, however, when she hesitates, and finally comes back to him.

"Oh! there is one thing more," she says, "and I had almost forgotten it. That ridiculous Dicky would not let me go until I promised to give you a message from him. He bade me ask you to give Lady Clontarf his dearest love."

"I will indeed," returns Clontarf, earnestly. "The very moment she wakes she shall have it." He is somehow inexpressibly touched by this affectionate message from the usually careless Dicky.

With a last kindly glance at him, Monica goes softly down the stairs, and he returns to the low chair beside his wife's couch.

CHAPTER XL.

"So Jupiter have of my soulē part,
As in this world right now I know not one
So worthy to be loved as Palamon!"

"That was her husband, and her love also."

THE twilight now has melted into a deeper gloom; night has fallen, drooping her "drowsy veil" o'er lake and garden and upon the dim shadowy woodlands down below. Thick clouds are rolling across a murky sky, and only one or two stars are visible. A feeble moon, of most "unhappy pace," is making weak efforts to pierce the dull barriers that lie between her and earth, but only now and then do her subdued rays conquer the pale masses of condensed moisture that threaten with rain and storm the coming morrow.

Clontarf, sitting before the fire in silent thought, casts every now and then a glance at the threatening heaven outside. He has been afraid to draw down the blinds or light the lamps, lest the smallest noise should rouse her from her healing slumber.

The fire—though he has not dared to poke it—has been true to him, and is flaming brightly; by its light he can watch Doris, as she lies there unconscious in all the grace and *abandon* of sleep.

Scene after scene in his life rises before him as he sits motionless, waiting for the hour when she shall again awaken; but for the most part his mind clings to the past few months,—those months in which Doris, though divided from him in spirit, has walked with him hand in hand. And at last, out of many musings, comes the certainty that though he had not loved her when they two stood together before the altar, yet that he loves her now, with a love that passeth knowledge.

The desire to tell her of this love grows upon him minute by minute. An intense longing to know the worst (he does not dare to dream of a best) so far possesses him that he swears to himself he will openly declare the truth to her when her eyes unclose. He will cast himself upon her mercy and learn his fate from her own lips.

But if there be no mercy for him! If her heart still keeps as cold to him as it has seemed to be during all these weary months,—if those beautiful eyes give back to him only scorn for his pleading,—what then?

His spirit rises up in revolt against such a decree as this. It cannot, it shall not be! Surely now, in her saddened state, her heart must open to him. She had not repulsed him in his attempt at sympathy; he alone had had the power to bring the healing drops of comfort to her eyes. In his arms she had sunk to a refreshing rest; he *will* not despair! He will tell her the whole truth, of how he loves her with all his heart and soul,—of how he demands at least her friendship in return,—and how he is content to wait patiently until time shall ripen that friendship into a warmer feeling. Alas! will that be ever?

How long she has been sleeping! Rising, he bends anxiously over her, and, by the uncertain flicker of the firelight, watches the beautiful face, as it lies wrapped in peaceful slumber.

Her lips are slightly parted; one arm is thrown languidly above her head. There is upon her lips a soft girlish smile, that speaks of happy dreams. With a contraction of the heart he notices for the first time the strong likeness that existed between her and the pretty dead child who had been buried only yesterday.

The smile fades. She moves uneasily. With a quick panting sigh, born of a returning consciousness fraught with grief, she opens wide her eyes, and meets his, fixed anxiously upon her.

"Oh! it is you,—*you*," she murmurs, with passionate relief and gladness. "I was dreaming, and——" Here dreams, and all, give place to the reality of the present. Shaking off the last remnants of sleep from her tired brain, she springs to her feet, and says, hurriedly, "How long I have been lying here! It is night now, and it was daylight when last I remember anything. And you,"—she hesitates,—"you have not been here all this time, have you?"

"Yes: it seemed a little time. I wish it had been longer, for your sake."

"Oh, I am so sorry," she says, with keen distress. "How horribly lonely it must have been for you! Why did you not go down to the others? I should have been——"

"Do not at least say happier without me," interrupts he, gently.

"No, no! Happier! Happiness! There are no such words." She turns from him with a little abrupt gesture, full of woe, and then as quickly looks back at him again. "Ah! the relief," she cries, passionately, "of waking to find some one near me,—something human! But," checking herself, "I cannot bear to picture you here—alone."

"I was not alone: you were here. And once Monica came, bringing you a message from Dicky Browne. It was 'his dearest love.'"

"That was kind of him," says Doris, softly; but even as she says it her mind travels backwards, and she hears Dicky uttering some of his gay, extravagant compliments to a little white-robed figure, that answers him back again with a sunny smile, a jest, and a graceful shake of a fair curly head. Alas! alas! that pretty head! how low it lies to-day!

"Did you sit here doing nothing?" she asks, presently, when she has conquered her emotion. Her tone is faint and full of sorrowful languor.

"I suppose you would call it nothing, but I was thinking,—thinking of you."

The fire bursting into a brighter flame at this moment shows to her his face, pale and nervous, but full of purpose. He comes a step nearer to her. Her heart beats madly, and, as if unable to remain still, she moves forward impulsively, and stands before him, with one hand upon the head of the couch, as if to steady herself.

"I was thinking of you," repeats Clontarf, steadily, "and of myself too. I was wondering what the future has in store for us. Is it hope, or despair? You alone can say."

"I?"

"Yes, you! The hour has come when the truth must be told,—the truth that has arisen out of all these past false months. The reason why I married you (forgive me this retrospection) you know. I am glad now that I then stubbornly refused to conceal it from you. It was to save the honor of an old name. What you do *not* perhaps know is that I have learned to love you since our marriage far dearer than even the old name, or worldly fame, or wealth, or life itself!"

He pauses. The terrible constraint he has laid upon himself has enabled him to say all this in a low, calm voice; but now his courage fails him. He does not dare to look at her, and his voice when next he breaks the silence is disheartened and unsteady.

"Once you saved my life," he says, huskily. "Do not compel me to wish it had not been in your power to do so.

You gave it to me; do not make it now worse than useless to me. I offer you the first, the only love I have ever known. Darling, *darling*," cries he, throwing out his arms towards her, "now that your heart is empty, take me into it; try—*try* to love me."

It is his final appeal for grace. The room seems to grow suddenly dark as he waits with an anguish indescribable for her answer. Her very face fades from before his eyes, all things wax dim. He is blind, deaf; but he can still feel——

Two soft arms, that, stealing upwards, clasp his neck! Two tender hands, that slowly, slowly draw his head downwards until his face rests against another face, that is the dearest thing to him in all this world.

"Did you never know? Did you never guess?" she asks, in a whisper so faint, so low, as to be almost inaudible.

"I know nothing," returns he, passionately, clasping her still closer in his arms. "Doris, if you mean that there is hope for me, tell me so with your own dear lips. Beloved, if your heart is really mine, say, 'I love you.'"

"I love you—with all my soul," returns she, solemnly. Then suddenly she shrinks from him, and a bitter sob breaks from her.

"Oh, if this should prove untrue!" she cries, sharp fear in her tone. "If I should wake to find it a dream like all the rest! Donat—Donat! you *do* mean it, don't you? I have nobody left me in the world now but you, since Vera —oh! Vera—*Vera!*"

He draws her even closer into the warm shelter of his arms. With tender, loving words and gentle caresses he soothes her, until at last she is calmer than she has been ever since the sad event that has darkened her life.

"You will not give way to despair," he says, "now when you have found some one whose happiness is wholly dependent upon you. My darling, let us leave this place, for a time at least. I thought of Norway first, and then, a little later on, Italy, and then——"

"Don't leave me behind you," interrupts she, with vehement eagerness. "Take me with you wherever you go. I don't care where it is, but only away from this!"

There is the light of a great content within his eyes, as he lifts her face tenderly with his hand and gazes into it.

"O love," he says, with passionate fondness, "I don't think we shall ever be separated again either in body or spirit."

THE END.

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